Zenon Franco

Magnus Wins With White

Foreword by Peter Heine Nielsen

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Zenon Franco

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* A previous version was included in *Test Your Chess* by the same author, Everyman, 2014

** A previous version was included in *Planning. Move by Move* by the same author, Everyman, 2019

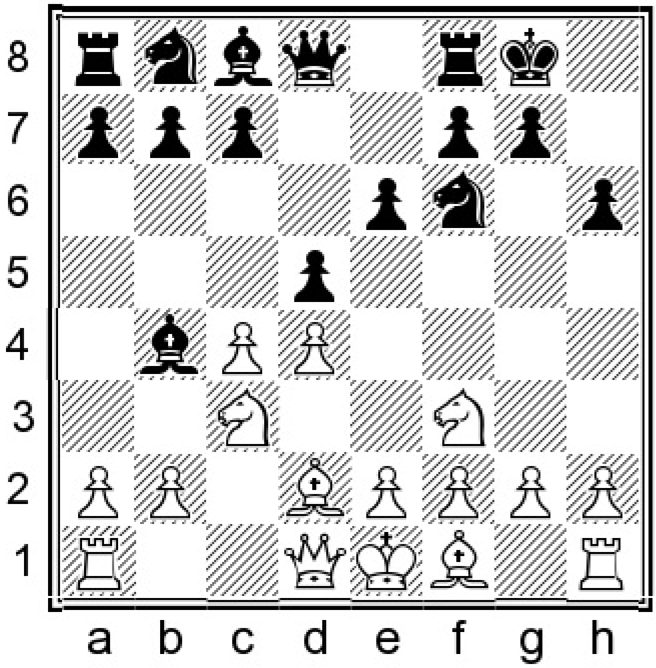
Foreword by Peter Heine Nielsen

“I think I first have to reach 30 to be called a legend.”

Perhaps, yet by the age of 29 Magnus has created so many interesting games of chess that there is plenty material for not just one book, but two! It does in some way feel early to define any kind of “status”, as hopefully titles are still to come, brilliances to be won and playing style to evolve. It is very much work in progress, even if “work” feels the wrong way to describe Magnus’s attitude to chess, which is very much better defined by passion and curiosity. 2019 was the year of AlphaZero, with Magnus playing h4! at any reasonable moment, while 2020, the year of this book’s publishing, has just included a brilliant win vs. Giri with an early g4!

Magnus Carlsen (2863) - Anish Giri (2764) [D38]
Legends of Chess chess24.com INT (1.2), 21.07.2020

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 d5 4.Nc3 Bb4 5.Bg5 h6 6.Bd2 0-0



7.g4 Bxc3 8.Bxc3 Ne4 9.Qc2 c5 10.dxc5 b6 11.g5 hxg5 12.h4 g4 13.Ng5 f5 14.Bg2 bxc5 15.0-0-0 Nxg5 16.hxg5 Qxg5+ 17.Kb1 Nd7 18.cxd5 Nb6 19.dxe6 Bxe6 20.Bxa8 Rxa8 21.Qd2 Qg6 22.Qd6 f4+ 23.Ka1 Rf8 24.Qe5 g3 25.fxg3 Nc4 26.Qh5 Qxh5 27.Rxh5 Ne3 28.Rg1 Bf5 29.b3 fxg3 30.Rxg3 Bg4 31.Rxc5 Rf1+ 32.Kb2 Nd1+ 33.Ka3 Nxc3 34.Rxg4

1–0

In 2017 it was 1 f4!? vs. Kramnik. Seemingly, any pawn, or any strategy, will do at the right time! Magnus is connected both to cutting edge artificial intelligence, and to the psychology of Lasker a century back. Having grown up as part of the “internet generation”, Magnus has gotten an enormous amount of experience by playing thousands of games at fast time controls online, yet has also made a careful study of the classics, often referring to them.

Defining him is as difficult as facing him at the board. You just can’t know for sure what to expect. A tenacious 7 hour grind, or a blitz attack on your king? Bad luck for the opponents, but good luck for the reader of this book! It will take you to all corners of chess styles, as Magnus universally masters them all. Zenon does a great job of explaining Magnus’s moves in a human manner. Especially fitting in the sense that the champion himself often repeats the necessity to understand a chess position from a human perspective, not just as numeric output from an engine.

Defining the book is somewhat complicated. Obviously, it is a games collection, but it is not really a biography in the sense that tournament details, anecdotes etc., are omitted, and the focus is chess! If anything, I would say it is something as rare as a book about the middlegame explained via Carlsen’s games. The format has an interesting twist. The reader will have to pause, think for himself and try to “guess” Carlsen’s next move before moving on and seeing the explanations.

Bent Larsen, historically the strongest Scandinavian chess player till the appearance of Carlsen, published a series of booklets in the 1970s called *Bent Larsen’s Skakskole*. Some of the books were designed exactly according to this concept, called *Find the Master’s Move*. Another book in the series was *Find the Plan*, later to become Magnus’s first chess book containing 50 exercises to find the right middlegame plan. Larsen’s teaching style was to expose the reader to knowledge, not necessarily grouped thematically, but in that way perhaps representing reality better. And should one choose to read this book not only as entertainment and for pleasure, of which there is a lot, but also in the hope of improving one’s games, the material is there. Excellent chess moves from the best player in the world and perhaps in history, explained in a simple and instructive manner for everybody to understand. Have fun!

Grandmaster **Peter Heine Nielsen,**
Chief Second and Coach to Magnus Carlsen

Dedicated to Don Pololo, who taught me to enjoy reading.

Introduction

It is my great pleasure to begin collaboration with Elk and Ruby to publish the first of two books about the games of Magnus Carlsen. This book includes 32 games of the World Champion when he wins with White. A second book, *Magnus Wins With Black*, is forthcoming.

It is written in the "move by move" format, which I believe to be a good training tool, containing exercises and tests. This format is a great platform for studying chess, improving both skills and knowledge, as the reader is continually challenged to find the best moves and the author provides answers to probing questions throughout.

Of Sven Magnus Carlsen (born on 30 November 1990, Tonsberg, Norway), Viswanathan Anand said in 2006: "The question is not whether Magnus Carlsen will be World Champion. The only doubt is when he will be World Champion." Well, he became World Champion in 2013, after defeating Anand himself, and he has since retained his title on three occasions. He won against Anand again in 2014 and, after the next matches finished tied in classical games, he won the tie-breaks against Sergey Karjakin in 2016[1] and Fabiano Caruana in 2018.

[1] See the book *Sergey Karjakin: Best Games of the Minister of Defence* by Alexander Kalinin for more details (Elk and Ruby, 2020)

I had the pleasure of meeting Magnus Carlsen at the beginning of his career. He played several times in Spain in 2005, and as Press Chief of a tournament in Leon that year, I translated the questions and his answers at the press conference after his game with Anand. I remember one of the questions Carlsen answered at the press conference was what he would highlight in the play of Anand. His answer was: "It is perfect."

Carlsen was only 14 years old at the time. He felt uncomfortable being at the center of attention. Now, though, the situation is very different. Carlsen is a high-profile character and he is famous far beyond chess circles, so it is natural for him to be at the center of attention. In interviews he answers the questions with objectivity and is frequently self-critical.

At this moment, when the book is near to go to print, Magnus Carlsen is at the highest point of his career since 2014. His three tournaments of 2019 finished in victories and he is clearly ahead of his rivals, which hadn't been the case for several years. Indeed, Carlsen himself considers that he is playing better than ever, although he commented that his main goal is to continue progressing.

We frequently highlight the practical side of his play in this book, something Carlsen takes very seriously, as we shall see; this aspect of the game is often omitted from commentaries.

Finally, I want to talk a little more about Don Pololo, the man to whom this book is dedicated. He was a friend of my father and lived quite close to us, about 25 minutes' walk. There were very few phones in our neighbourhood, so when there was something urgent to communicate to him, I was the chosen one to carry a message to Don Pololo's home.

This wasn't actually much fun, of course, so one day I decided to seek compensation. I asked Don Pololo if he had any comics: he said he hadn't but he gave me a book. I was 8 or 9 years old, so I can't say I was happy with that.

The same happened the next time I made that request. And I got a book again, written by Emilio Salgari. So, after my initial recalcitration, I finally started to read them; this was my first step to becoming an avid reader.

I hope you enjoy this book.

Grandmaster Zenon Franco Ocampos
Ponteareas, July 2020

simonsen vogtwiig

At the Lindores Abbey Chess Stars Tournament in Scotland, May 2019, Magnus Carlsen was gifted a copy of the book Checkmate! The Love Story of Mikhail Tal and Sally Landau *written by Mikhail Tal's first wife Sally Landau. This book, published by Elk and Ruby, was presented to him personally by Mikhail and Sally's son Gera Tal. Later that year it was short-listed for the English Chess Federation Book of the Year 2019 prize. In this photo taken at the event by Sagar Shah of ChessBase India, Magnus is admiring the photo of Sally aged 18 at the beginning of the book. Also in the photo are Anatoly Karpov's long-term manager and organizer of the annual Aeroflot chess tournament Alexander Bakh talking with Magnus's father Henrik, as well as Vishy Anand and Sergey Karjakin in the background.*

Magnus Carlsen’s Style

Lubomir Kavalek gave Carlsen the nickname “The Mozart of Chess” in 2007 in *The Washington Post*, when his career was just beginning. Carlsen said years later that he was not enthusiastic about this moniker.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Carlsen doesn’t usually get an advantage thanks to home preparation. From time to time other champions would get even winning advantages prepared at home (Garry Kasparov immediately comes to mind), so how does he win so many games? Simen Agdestein, Carlsen’s trainer during the first part of his career, pointed to the drastic change of style that Carlsen made: at the beginning his approach was very aggressive and risky, but he soon realised that this was not effective against stronger opposition and so he changed it.

Carlsen broadened his opening repertoire, and progressed in positional play, his main goal being to gain a promising or at least reasonable position after the opening and to try and outplay his opponent in the middlegame. If this was not achieved, the ending was still there, where Carlsen was able to continue playing till the very end in search of victory. His approach to the chess struggle remains unaltered to this day.

Kasparov was his trainer for a brief time (some months in 2009 and 2010). He commented that Carlsen’s positional style reminded him of other world champions of the past, such as Anatoly Karpov, Jose Raul Capablanca, and Vasily Smyslov, rather than Alexander Alekhine, Mikhail Tal and Kasparov himself. Kasparov defined Carlsen as a combination of Karpov and Fischer, adding “He gets his positions [and] then never lets go of that bulldog bite. Exhausting for opponents.” He has also said that Carlsen “has the ability to correctly evaluate any position, which only Karpov could boast of before.”

In 2016, Karpov said that it was quite possible that Carlsen’s style resembled his own. He has also said: “He grew up when I was at the height of my powers, and perhaps he studied my games. He can convert a minimal advantage into a real one.” Well, maybe this is not entirely accurate: Carlsen was born in 1990, and in 1995 Karpov was clearly past his prime. Nevertheless, Carlsen has for sure studied Karpov’s games carefully, as he did with the games of all the great masters of the past.

Anand said in 2012 that Carlsen had an incredible innate sense. “The majority of ideas occur to him absolutely naturally. He’s also very flexible, he knows all the structures and he can play almost any position. Magnus can literally do almost everything.” So it was very difficult to compete with him.

In a 2012 interview, Vladimir Kramnik emphasised Carlsen’s “excellent physical shape” as a big contributing factor to his success. This helps him to avoid “psychological lapses”, thereby maintaining a high standard of play over long games and at the end of tournaments, when the energy levels of his opponents have dropped.

Levon Aronian said in 2015: “Magnus’ main secret is his composure and the absence of any soul-searching after mistakes during a game.”

Back in 2005, Viktor Korchnoi said that Carlsen reminded him of the young Mikhail Tal. This is difficult to agree with, but Korchnoi was referring not to Tal’s tactical ability or imagination in attack, but to his flexibility of thinking.

John Nunn said during the Candidates Tournament of 2013 that Carlsen was mentally very strong, and that even if he didn't win the tournament (he did) it wouldn't be a heavy blow: he would think something like "I didn't win this time, well, I will do it next time..." Nunn also said that Carlsen was a real phenomenon in chess and that he would belong to the chess elite for a long time.

France's Maxime Vachier-Lagrave commented on the apparently simple chess which Carlsen plays, that his ideas were probably not very difficult to see, but they were difficult to understand quickly.

Many people have also mentioned that his universal style resembles that of Boris Spassky in the sixties, when he was the best player in the world.

In 2019 some people talked about a change in Carlsen's style, influenced by AlphaZero. Frankly, I don't see any relevant change here. That style is inimitable for a human, nobody can compare in terms of such tactical depth. One of the main reasons given was that he now plays h4-h5 against the kingside fianchetto more frequently, and sometimes h6, but it is hard to call that a revolutionary change. We discuss this a little in some games in this book.

Carlsen and Lasker

Some years ago, I wrote two small books about Carlsen's games in the period to 2015. Back then, I naturally shared the opinions of these brilliant personalities. However, something changed when I began to write about Emanuel Lasker over more than a year. The similarities between the styles of Lasker and Carlsen became clearer and more relevant.

Considering their high level of play, neither of them attached much importance to the opening (even though there are several variations named after Lasker). Rather, they were extremely gifted in both the middlegame and the ending, and possessed the capacity to play for a win to the very end.

Lasker has probably won more games than any other world champion from positions that were objectively lost or "dead drawn". Carlsen wins more equal endings or those predicted to be a draw, but he has also posted several "Laskerian" examples. At a press conference after a game during the 2019 Shamkir tournament (which Carlsen won two points ahead of the runner up), he mentioned his opponent's body language and assigned great importance to psychology during chess, something that was characteristic of Lasker, too. He has also said that computer evaluations are not always helpful, because sometimes they evaluate a position in favour of one side (even if objectively correct), without considering that for a human the position is easier to play for the other side, or without considering that a player with a certain style may feel uncomfortable playing that kind of position.

So I believe that up until recent years a name was missing in the opinions of Carlsen's style, and a major one at that: Emanuel Lasker. However, lately this comparison has been made more frequently, among them in the excellent book on Lasker written by John Nunn.

Let's finish this brief analysis with opinions expressed by Carlsen himself. In 2014, he said: "Without any false modesty, I find a little bit of myself in several of them [the world champions of the past]. I have been reading about the match between Fischer and Karpov that didn't happen. I find a bit of myself in both those players. Another I could compare myself to is actually an American:

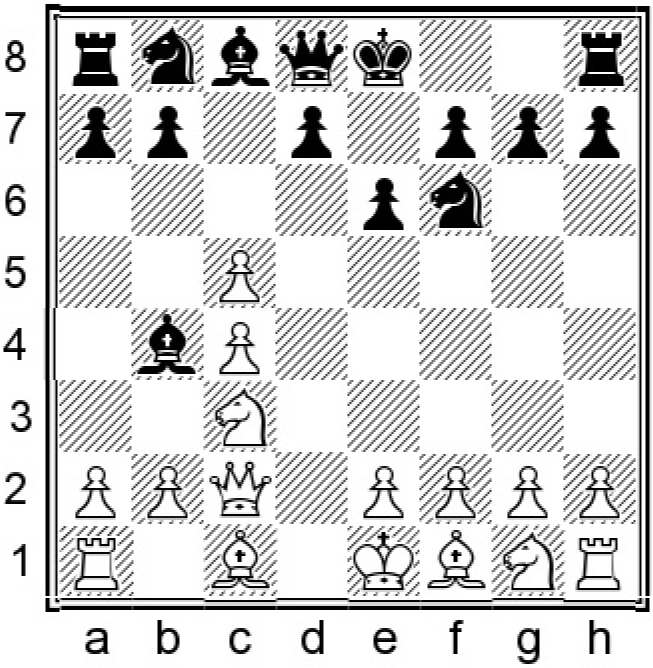
Reuben Fine, who was very strong but quit chess early on. I was just reading about him the other day and it didn't strike me before but now it strikes me that what he was doing in chess is similar to what I am doing." In a later interview (May 2019) in Denmark, Carlsen commented that many of his decisions were intuitive, suggested by knowledge accumulated over the years, the product of the innumerable patterns he had assimilated. He added that the capacity to adapt constantly to new situations is indispensable to succeed, which is obviously valid away from the board as well.

Show in Text Mode

32 White Wins

Game 1
Magnus Carlsen – Nurlan Ibrayev
Nimzo-Indian Defence [E38]
Calvia (Olympiad) (10), 25.10.2004

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.Qc2 c5 5.dxc5



5...Bxc5

The more flexible 5...0-0 is the main line, waiting for a3 to take on c5, while the sharper 5...Na6 is also played.

Question: So, what is the advantage of this capture?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black wants to play the Hedgehog setup, with typical moves ...a6, ...b6 and ...d6, but his bishop must be on e7 first, and this is the first step.

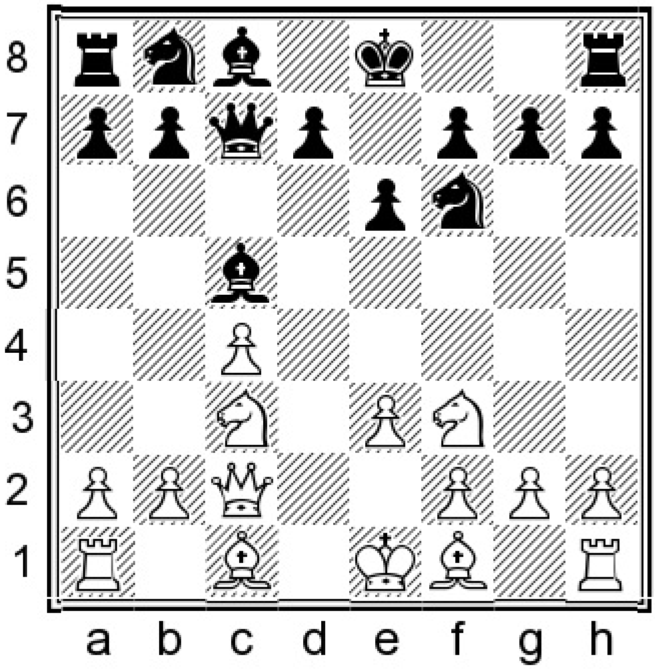
6.Nf3 Qb6

The queen is going to c7, but first Black wants to force e3 to lock in the c1-bishop.

7.e3

After 7.e4 Ng4 White must play 8.Nd1 or sacrifice the f-pawn, which is unclear.

7...Qc7



8.b3

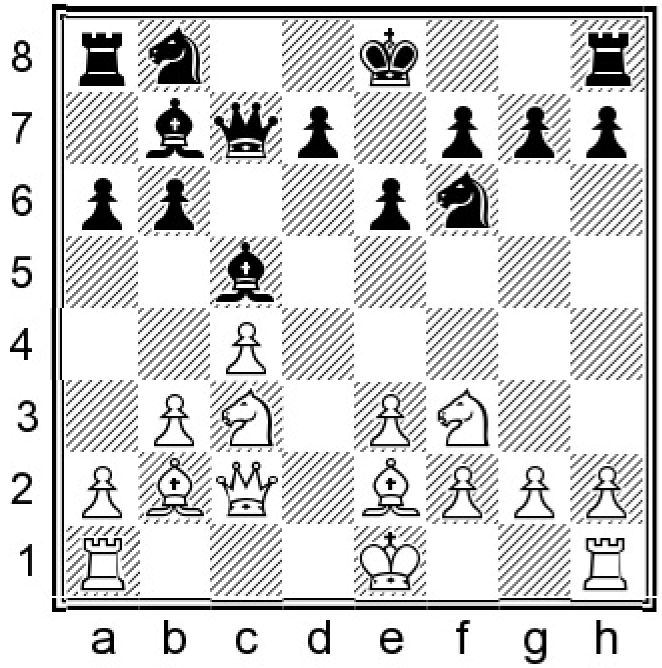
Question: White had several options. Why did he choose this move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen could have played 8.Be2 or 8.Bd3, and then castle short, or even 8.Nb5, but he preferred to develop this bishop to the best place, the long diagonal, and only then decide where to put his king or even play something different.

8...b6 9.Bb2 Bb7

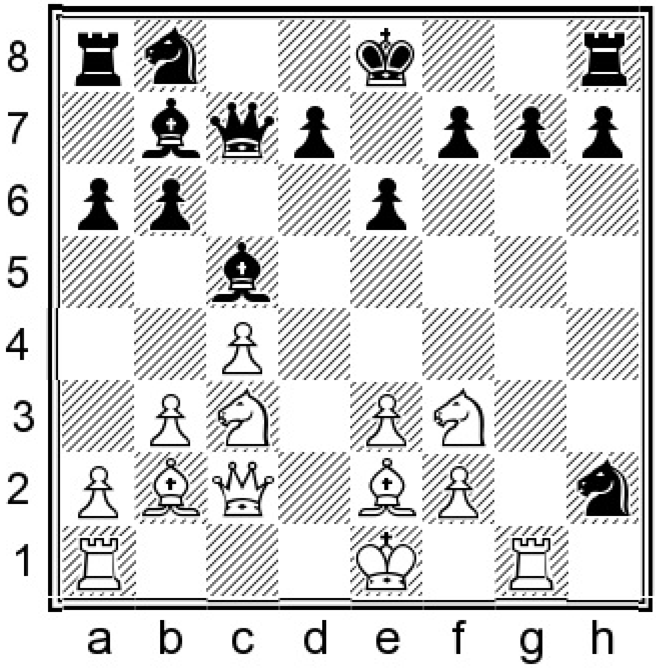
Black could play 9...a6 first. Carlsen had faced this move earlier the same year in Moscow, and that game continued 10.Be2 Bb7.



Exercise: Which move did Carlsen make here (he had recently turned only 13)?

Show/Hide Solution

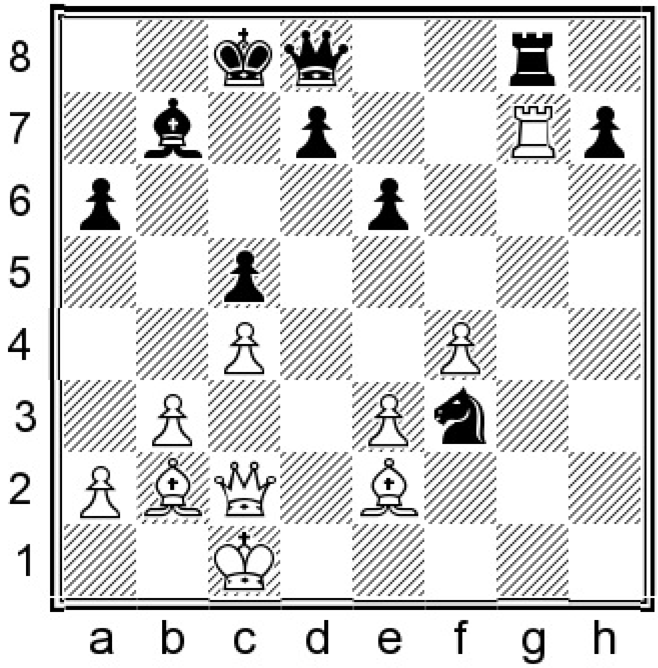
Answer: 11.g4!? ("I felt that the type of position after 11.0-0 was too tedious to offer a real advantage, and 11.g4 is very typical in this kind of position," Carlsen commented in 2004; the following comments in quotation marks are his own). 11...Nxg4 ("Taking the bait, as 11...h6 12.0-0-0 promises White the initiative") 12.Rg1 Nxh2 (12...Ne5 13.Nxe5 Qxe5 14.0-0-0 and 12...Nf6 13.Rxg7 are worse, the opening of the g-file favours White, the rook points at f7 and forces Black to lose time, and not 13...Bf8 14.Rg3 Nc6 due to 15.Nd5!)



Exercise: Which move did Carlsen choose here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: 13.Ng5! ("White clearly has (at least) enough compensation for the two pawns with his active pieces and Black's stranded knight. The basic trick is 13...h6 14.Nxf7, winning quickly") 13...Nc6 14.0-0-0 Ne5 (It was essential to play 14...d5!) 15.Nce4! ("The pressure is mounting") 15...0-0-0 ("Black has nothing else") 16.Nxc5 bxc5 17.f4! Nef3 18.Nxf7 Nxg1 19.Rxg1 ("By now Black's position is looking very difficult. White wins back the exchange and the h- and g-pawns") 19...Nf3 20.Rxg7 (20.Bxf3! was better) 20...Rhg8 21.Nxd8 Qxd8 (21...Rxg7!)

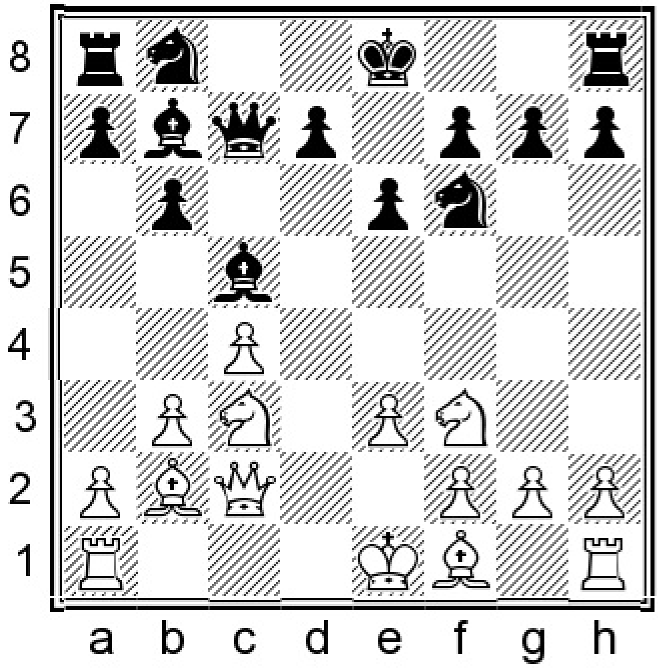


Exercise: The preceding moves of both sides were not the best, but now Carlsen played the strongest move, what did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: 22.Bf6! ("A fairly important finesse, vacating the b2-square for the king". If 22.Qxh7 immediately then 22...Rh8 follows, and White's king feels more uncomfortable) 22...Qf8 23.Qxh7, a pawn up and with more active pieces. 1–0 in 30 moves, Carlsen – Shaposhnikov, Moscow 2004.

Let's go back to our main game.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply to 9...Bb7?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10.Nb5!

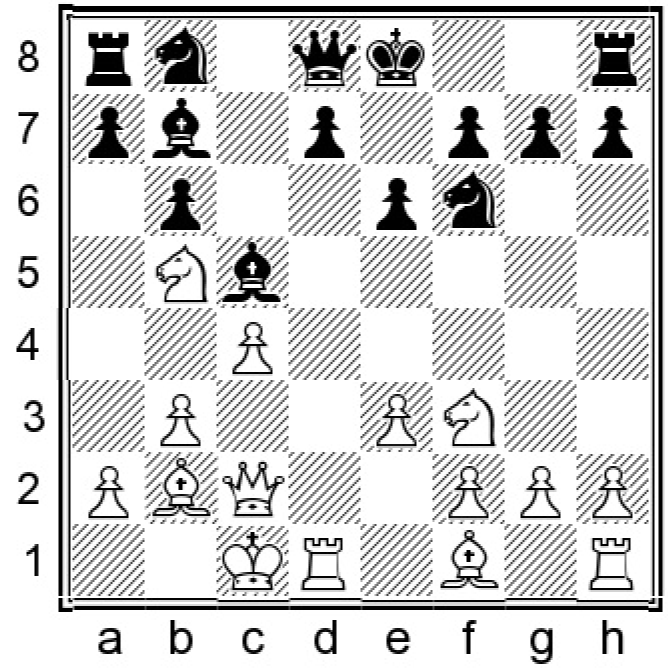
Trying to exploit the missing move ...a6. The text is probably no better than 10.Be2 followed by 0-0, but it creates more practical problems.

10...Qd8

Nothing is obtained by playing 10...Bb4+ first: after 11.Bc3 followed by 0-0-0, the exchange of the dark-squared bishops is not favourable for Black, because of the weak d6 square.

11.0-0-0

Now Black must look out for an eventual Nd6+.



11...0-0?!

Very natural, as Nd6 would come without check now, and Black is not forced to take it. However, it is a mistake, as Carlsen will show.

It was better to play 11...Nc6!, not fearing 12.Bxf6?! Qxf6 13.Nc7+ Ke7 14.Nxa8 Ba3+ 15.Kd2 Rxa8, with good compensation for the exchange, thanks to White's king's situation.

12.Nd6+? Bxd6 13.Rxd6 Nb4! isn't promising either.

White should choose between 12.a3 and 12.Be2.

Exercise: How did Carlsen show the move played was poor?

Show/Hide Solution

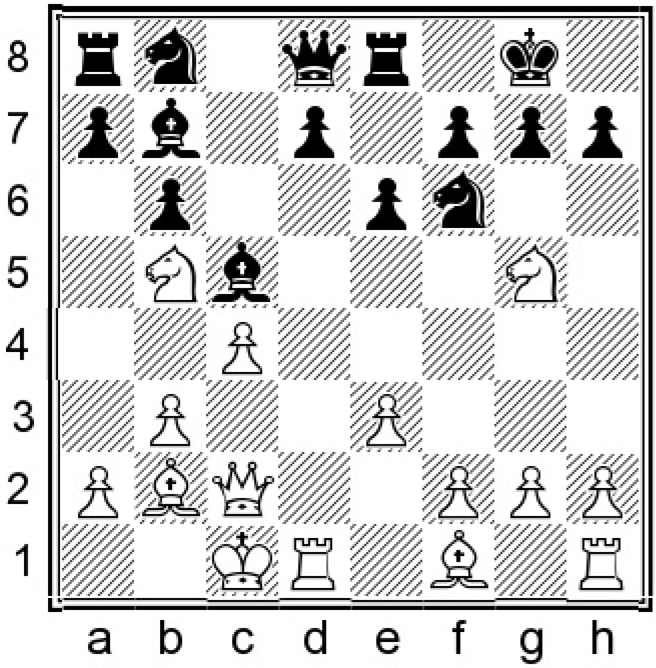
Answer:

12.Ng5!

Simple and strong. White threatens to take on f6 and then Qxh7#.

12...Re8

12...g6 would of course leave the long diagonal too weak. There would follow 13.Qc3 and after 13...Be7 White can play 14.Nd6 or 14.h4 with an attack, and Black is left without counterplay.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13.h4!

Not the hasty 13.Bxf6?, as after 13...Qxf6 14.Qxh7+? Kf8 15.Nc7 Rc8 16.Nxa8 Qxg5, Black wins material. 13.Bd3 was interesting, but Carlsen didn't want to close off the d-file yet, to maintain the pressure on d7.

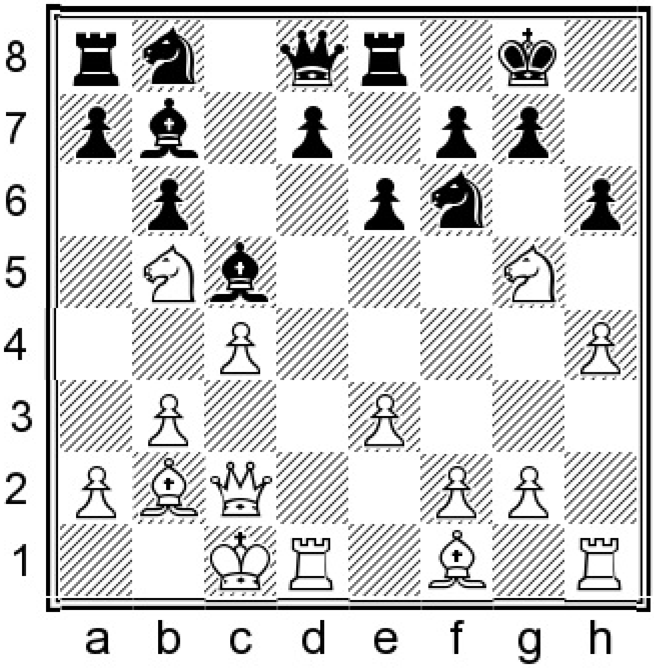
Now White threatens 14.Bxf6 Qxf6 15.Qxh7+ Kf8 16.Kb1, with a great advantage.

13...e5

Black closes the long diagonal and the f6-knight is safe now, so he plans to play 14...Na6.

13...Na6 was not possible, as thanks to the open d-file there could follow 14.Bxf6 Qxf6 15.Qxh7+ Kf8 16.Rxd7 and White is two pawns up: if 16...Qa1+ then 17.Qb1.

Question: But 13...e5 creates weaknesses, so why doesn't Black expel the annoying knight by playing 13...h6 first?



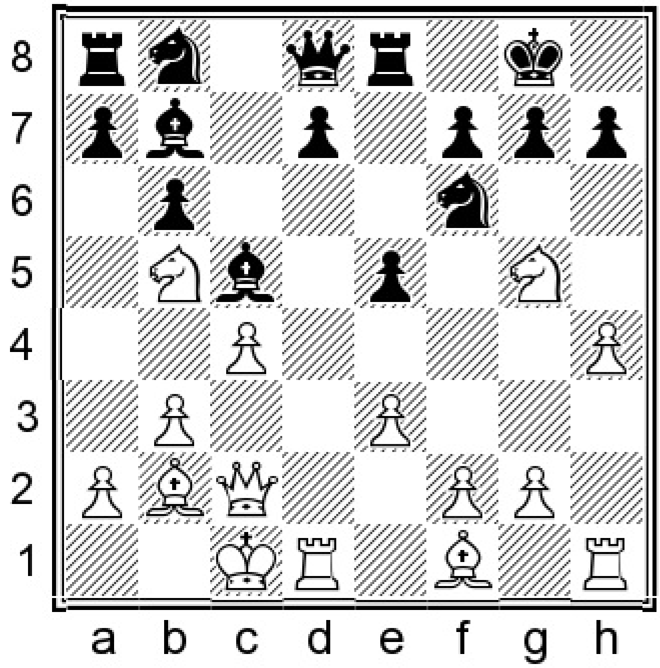
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The knight is not really under attack, as Black could hardly resist the attack through the open h-file after 14...hxg5 15.hxg5.

In that case White would again reject 14.Bxf6? Qxf6 15.Nc7 Rc8 16.Nxa8 hxg5 17.hxg5 Qxg5, winning; the trick 18.Nc7 Rxc7 19.Qh7+ Kf8 20.Qh8+ Ke7 21.Qxb8 wouldn't work because Black wins after 21...Qe5! thanks to the weakness of White's king and the tactical weakness of the queen on b8.

White could play in several ways instead; one is the direct 14.Nc7, winning material, because 14...hxg5 15.hxg5 Ne4 16.Nxe8 Qxe8 17.Bd3 Nxg5 18.Rh5, followed by 19.Rdh1, leads to an unstoppable attack.

Other possible moves, approved by the engines, are the quiet 14.Kb1 and the natural 14.Bd3, without fearing 14...hxg5 15.hxg5 Ng4 16.Rh7 when White gets a crushing attack once more, after e.g. 16...Qxg5 17.Rdh1.



14.Nd6

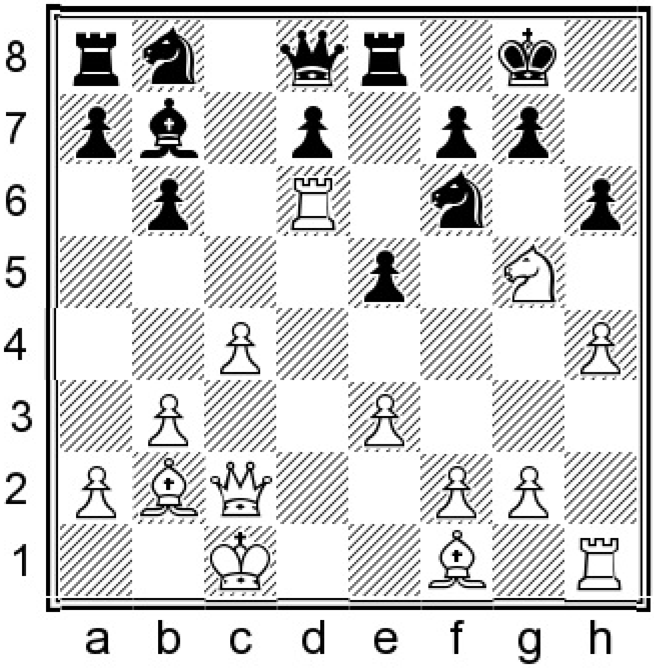
Carlsen could still wait, with useful moves like 14.a3 or 14.Kb1, but he prefers something more concrete, exchanging a defender and increasing the activity of his d1-rook.

Question: Is it better than the alternatives?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: No, objectively this is not better, but practicality it is a different matter, as constant pressure on the opponent can induce mistakes or force him to use too much time, so in practice maybe it turns out to be the strongest choice.

14...Bxd6 15.Rxd6 h6



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Qf5!?

An active move again, forcing Black to make concrete decisions. White wants to increase the pressure with 17.f4 or 17.Bd3.

The sacrifice Rxf6 is in the air, but 16.Rxf6 is not clearly favourable yet, as Black wouldn't play 16...hxg5? 17.hxg5 gxf6 because 18.Qh7+ Kf8 19.Qh8+ Ke7 20.Qxf6+ leads to mate.

Black would defend himself with 16...Qxf6, and after 17.Qh7+ Kf8 we reach a position we shall talk about later.

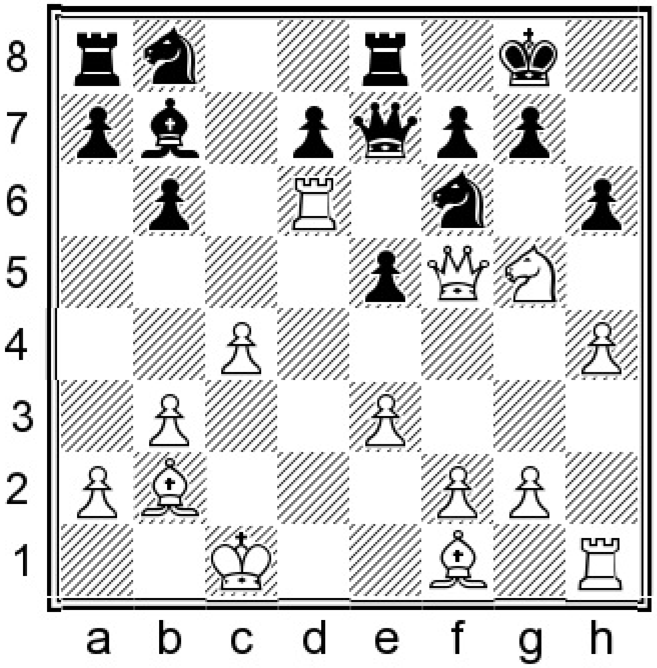
It is true that keeping the queen on c2, instead of placing it on a more active square like f5, is not very "human", but the cold engines show that Carlsen's move is not the best.

16.Bd3 was stronger, if 16...Na6 then 17.Bh7+ Kf8 18.Bg6! could follow, e.g.: 18...fxg6 19.Qxg6 Kg8 20.Qf7+ Kh8 21.f4!, with a very strong attack for the piece, while the b7-bishop and the a6-knight are mere spectators.

18...Nb4 19.Nxf7! Nxc2 20.Nxd8 Rexd8 21.Bxc2 Bxg2 22.Rg1 Bh3 23.Bxe5 is no better.

16...Nc6??

Black cracks under pressure. Yet seeing the deadly effect of 16.Qf5, how can we criticize him? Black had to play 16...Qe7!

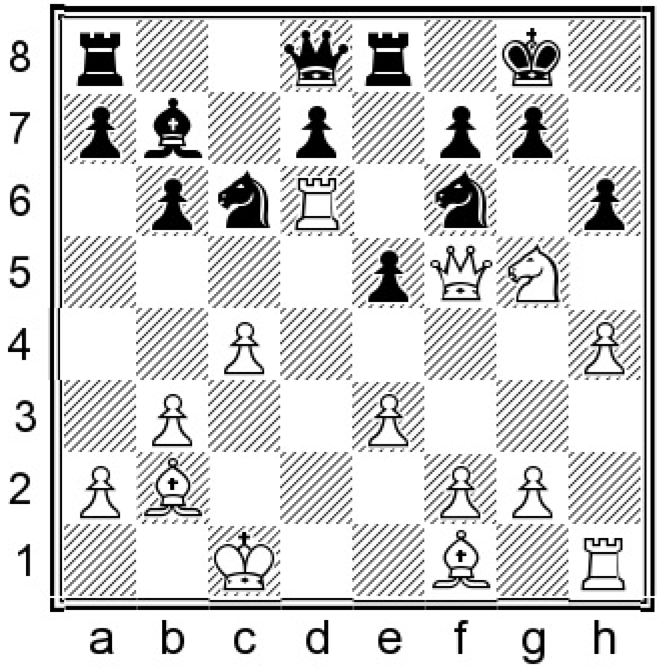


Exercise: How would you reply in that case?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: After 17.Ba3? Na6!, followed by ...Nc5, or 17.Rd2? Na6 the white attack disappears.

It is necessary to play 17.Rxf6!, reaching a position mentioned before; after 17...Qxf6 18.Qh7+ Kf8, there could follow 19.Ba3+ d6 20.Bd3 intending Be4 or Ne4, then 20...hxg5? 21.hxg5 Qd8 is bad again, because of e.g. 22.Qh8+ Ke7 23.Qxg7, but Black would play 20...Nd7!, and although White may be slightly better any result is possible after e.g.: 21.Be4 Ke7! (the only move that defends) 22.Bxb7 hxg5 23.Bxa8 Rxa8.



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen punish Black's choice?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.Rxf6!

Now this move is winning, as after 17...Qxf6 18.Qh7+ Kf8 White plays 19.Ne4!, winning the queen because 20.Ba3+ is threatened.

1–0

Carlsen played this and the partially commented game with the characteristic spirit of his early years, active play and continuing pressure on the opponent's position. In this case it caused a blunder, with immediate effect.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) When to castle is an important decision, generally it is advisable to do it soon. Nonetheless, it is necessary to be sure that the king effectively improves his position. (11...0-0? *11...*N*c6!)*

2.) When the opponent's king is weak, there is no time to lose; it is urgent to press the enemy position, trying to hamper his coordination. (12.Ng5! 13.h4!)

3.) Sometimes the objectively strongest move (*16.*B*d3!*) can be of equal practical strength to a different one which maintains the pressure. (16.Qf5!)

4.) Mistakes will always occur. Lasker taught us we need to be alert, because there is almost always a chance to defend and also a chance to blunder. (16...Nc6?? *16...*Q*e7!*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

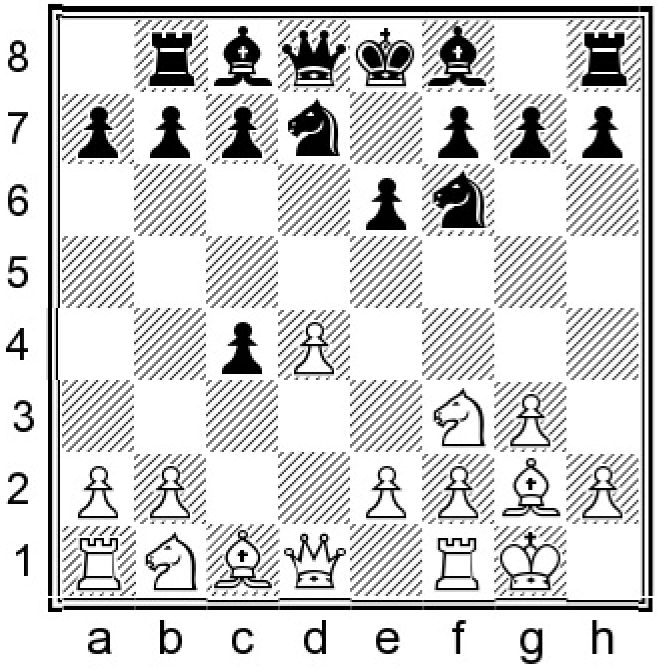
Game 2
Magnus Carlsen – Lajos Portisch
Catalan Opening [E04]
Gausdal (7), 24.04.2007

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.g3 dxc4 5.Bg2 Nbd7

This is a side-line. Portisch wanted to take Carlsen away from the trodden paths. It was occasionally played by several strong players such as Keres and Smyslov, and it was even used by Korchnoi against Kasparov in the Candidates match of 1983, albeit without much success.

6.0-0 Rb8

Black wants to defend his pawn at all cost.



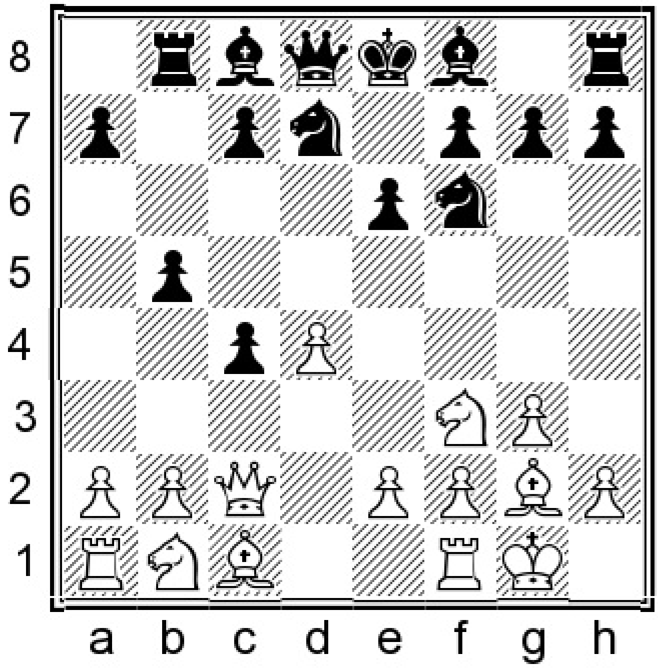
7.Qc2

Question: I don’t understand why he allows ...b5, defending the pawn?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This move, as you point out, doesn’t prevent the defence of the pawn. It is rarely played, but naturally there is an idea behind it. 7.a4 is more popular.

7...b5



Exercise: What is the idea Carlsen had in mind?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

8.b3!

This sacrifice is thematic; it is seen in similar positions of the Catalan Opening and hybrids between the English Opening and the Slav Defence.

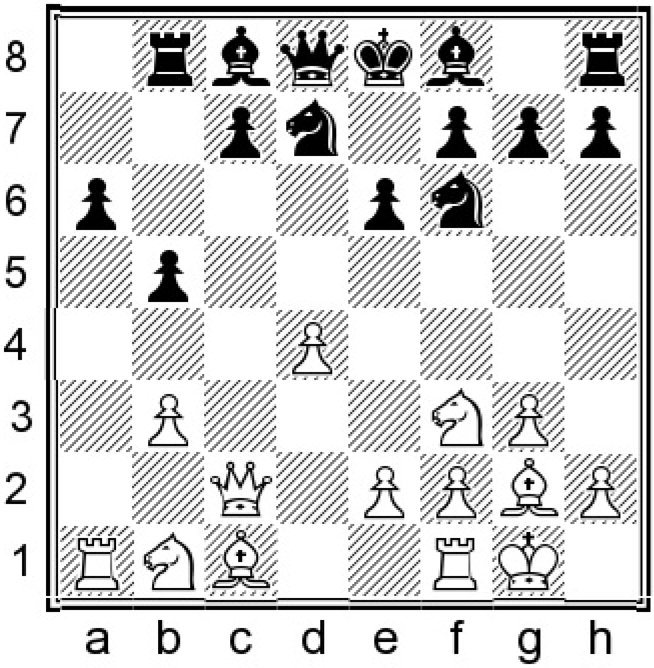
For the pawn White gets two half-open files, a freer game and the possibility to access (or at least pressurise) several squares on the queenside, including c6, c5, and the a- and c-pawns.

Another option is to open the a-file with 8.a4.

8...cxb3?!

Consistent, although after seeing the outcome it is natural to suggest 8...Bb7 9.bxc4 bxc4, returning the pawn, so Black can finish his development without major problems.

9.axb3 a6



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10.Ne5!

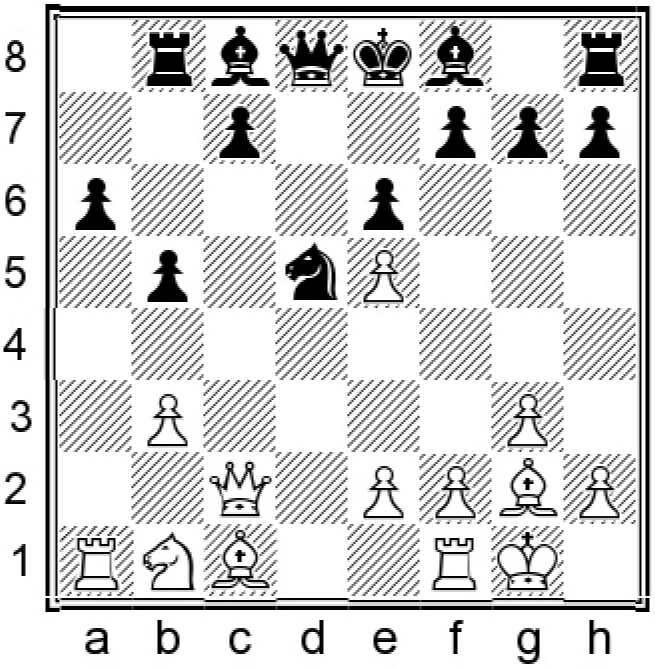
Threatening 11.Nc6. White allows his formation to be damaged, but at the cost of opening the d-file in his favour.

10...Nxe5?!

Black accepts the challenge, though it was not forced.

The resource 10...Nd5 seems untrustworthy, because it moves a piece for a second time; its idea is to answer 11.Nc6 with 11...Nb4!. After 11.Bxd5 Nxe5 12.Bg2 Nd7 (not 12...Qxd4?? 13.Bb2) White could play 13.Rd1, and then decide the location of his b1-knight and his c1-bishop with enough compensation for the pawn, but White wouldn't have it as easy as in the game.

11.dxe5 Nd5



Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.Rd1

With a concrete threat of 13.e4, and Black’s king is still in the center...

12...Qe7

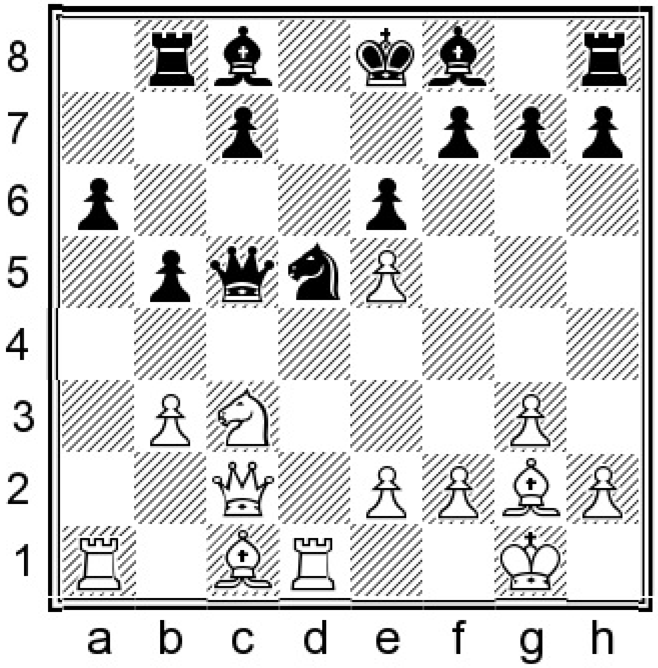
Question: Isn’t that an odd move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: A little, as it obstructs the development of the f8-bishop, but he also plans to play 13...Qc5 and then continue development.

Black didn’t want to play the more passive 12...Bd7. Another possibility was 12...Qd7, without allowing the capture on d8 with check. We have already seen a similar idea, in order to answer 13.e4 with 13...Nb4. There could follow 13.Qb2 instead, renewing the threat of e4, followed by the development of the c1-bishop.

13.Nc3 Qc5



Exercise: What do you think the 16-year-old Carlsen now played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.Rxd5

Question: This is not the same Carlsen you mentioned at the beginning of the book, surely? I thought Carlsen almost never sacrifices.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This sacrifice is more typical of the even younger Carlsen, that's right, and objectively it is not the best option, but from the practical point of view it is strong.

We can recall what Agdestein said about Carlsen's style at the beginning of his career.

Let me tell you something of my own childhood. This happened during one of the lectures that my teacher International Master Bernardo Wexler gave, in the Boca Juniors Club of Buenos Aires.

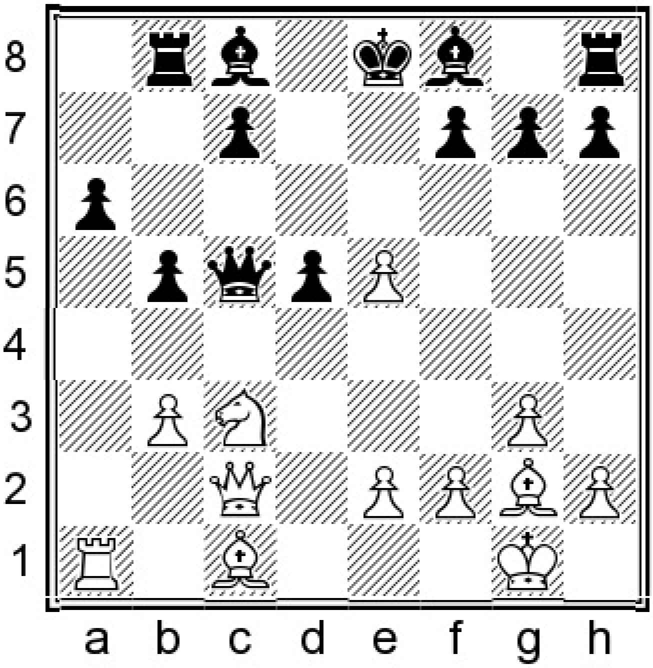
I was 12 or 13 years old when he showed us Fischer's games. Comparing them with those of Tal, for example, I didn't understand the complexities of the game, but I did understand something and I asked him: "But what is this? Fischer never sacrifices," almost complaining. Wexler smiled, seeing my youthful ignorance and told me: "Nooo, sometimes he does sacrifice."

Well, the same can be said of Carlsen: "sometimes he does sacrifice."

The exchange sacrifice Carlsen plays is tempting, but not forced.

The simplest alternative was 14.Bxd5 exd5 and then 15.Be3 Qc6 16.Rac1, where White gets his pawn back and remains with much more active pieces.

14...exd5



Exercise: 15...b4 is threatened, how should White counter it?

Show/Hide Solution

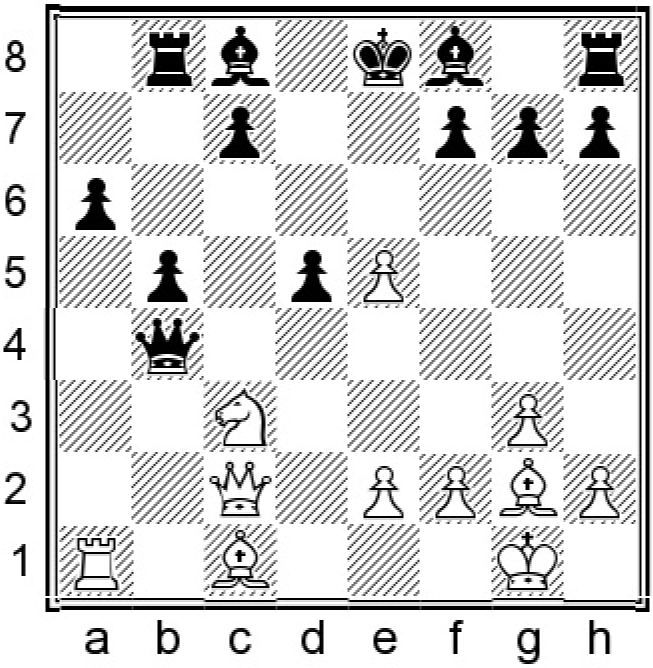
Answer:

15.b4!

A nice way to continue, winning time.

15...Qxb4

After 15...Qd4 16.Be3 Qxe5 17.Bf4 Qf6 18.Rd1, followed by Nxd5, Black continues to have development issues.



Exercise: Now White has several choices. He needs to choose between capturing material, developing more pieces with tempo and finding new ways to attack.

And there is a difficult question to be added to this: how?

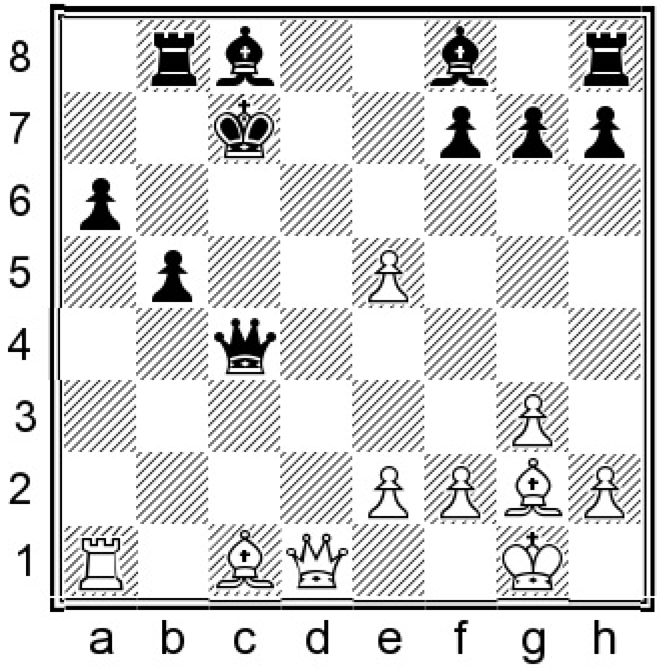
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Ba3?

The natural 16.Nxd5! was the strongest. White must be ready to sacrifice more material to exploit the bad position of Black's king. After 16...Qc4 17.Nxc7+ Kd8 there follows 18.Qd1+!, and 18...Bd7 is no defence, e.g. 19.Nxa6 Rc8 20.Bg5+ Ke8 21.Rc1, winning, and if the queen withdraws then 22.Rxc8+ and Qd8# follows.

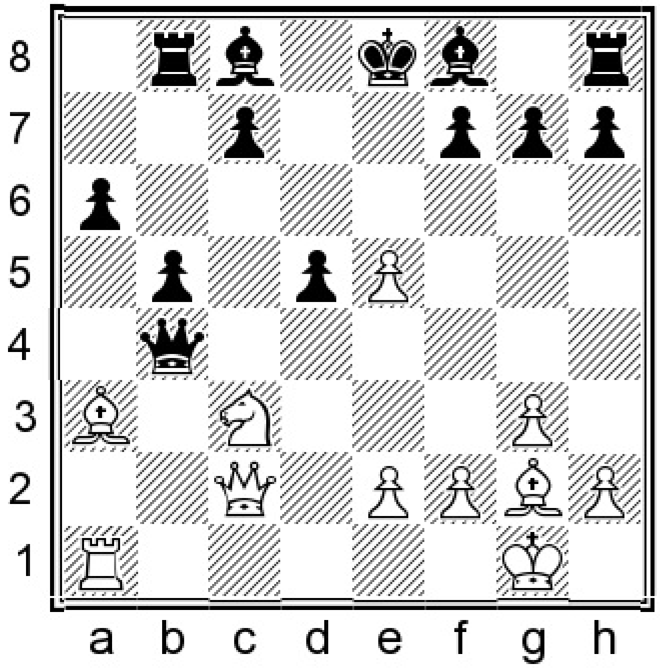
Exercise: In this variation, after 18...Kxc7 there is only one winning move, can you spot it?



Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There is no advantage after simple development: 19.Bf4 Be6 20.Rc1 wins the queen, but Black has two rooks and a safe king after 20...Bc5 21.Rxc4 bxc4, etc.

19.Bd5! is much better, and after 19...Qg4 20.Bf4 follows, threatening both 21.e6+ and 21.Rc1+, while now 20...Be6 is not enough because of 21.Rc1+ Kd7 22.Bxe6+ Kxe6 23.Rc7, with a mating attack.



Exercise: Where must the queen retreat to?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...Qg4?!

The queen is now too far from the queenside.

It was preferable to play 16...Qd4! to be able to get back to a7 in case of 17.Rd1 Qa7 (17...Qxe5? 18.Rxd5 Qf6 19.Ne4 is suicidal) 18.Bxf8 Kxf8 19.Nxd5. White has compensation but no clear advantage after 19...c5 followed by the development of the c8-bishop.

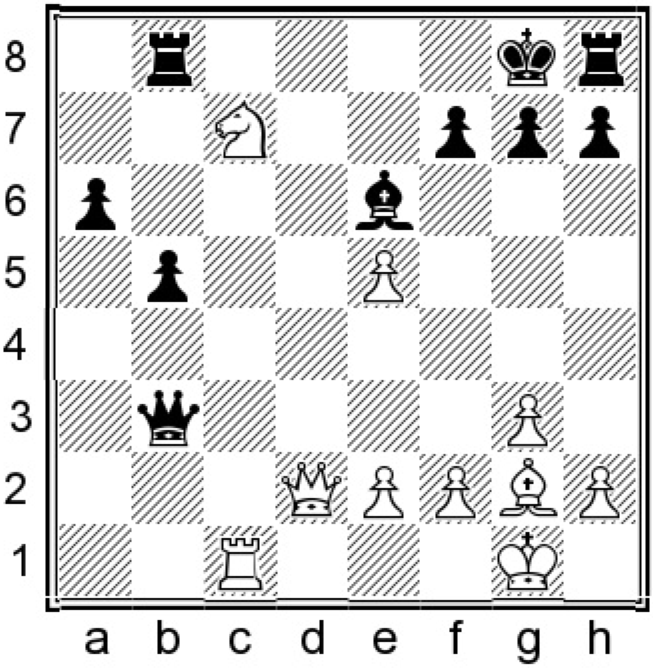
17.Bxf8 Kxf8 18.Nxd5 Qc4 19.Qd2

The queen keeps watch over b4 and a5, and prevents 19...c5 because of 20.Qa5!, and the queen’s infiltration wins.

19...Be6

Playing 19...Bf5 would put the bishop out of the range of the knight after 20.Rc1 Qb3 21.Nxc7, but it wouldn’t be a great improvement, as there is a powerful alternative: 21.Qd4! (threatening 22.Qc5+ and Philidor’s mate after 22...Kg8 23.Ne7+ Kf8 24.Ng6+ Kg8 25.Qf8+!), 21...Qa3 22.Rxc7, with ideas like 23.Qa7, 23.Ne3 or 23.Nf4 followed by Bd5.

20.Rc1 Qb3 21.Nxc7 Kg8



Black needs one tempo to play ...h6 and create a luft. In that case the king would safely move to h7 and Black would be better. However, White’s dynamic superiority will make this very difficult to carry out.

Exercise: All White’s following moves contain a threat. Which is the first one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

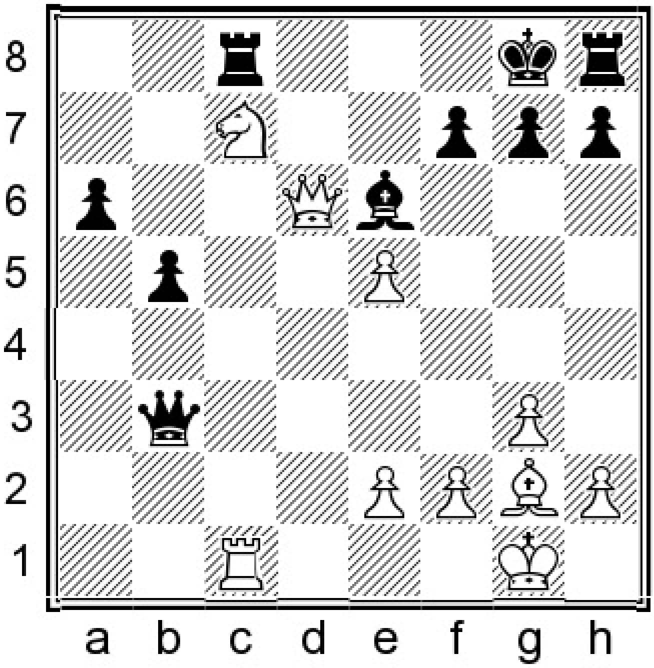
22.Qd6!

Activating the queen with the first threat, 23.Nxe6.

22...Rc8

After 22...Rf8 White would open lines with 23.Bd5!, where Black is given mate after 23...Bxd5 24.Nxd5 h6 (or 24...g6 25.Ne7+ Kg7 26.Qf6+ Kh6 27.Nf5+ and mate) 25.Qxf8+! Kxf8 26.Rc8#

In case of 23...Qb2 White would obtain a big advantage playing 24.Nxe6!! Qxc1+ 25.Kg2 Qc8 (after 25...Rc8 there are several winning moves, such as 26.Qd7) 26.Nxf8 Qxf8 27.Qd7 (better than 27.Qxa6), followed by e6.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

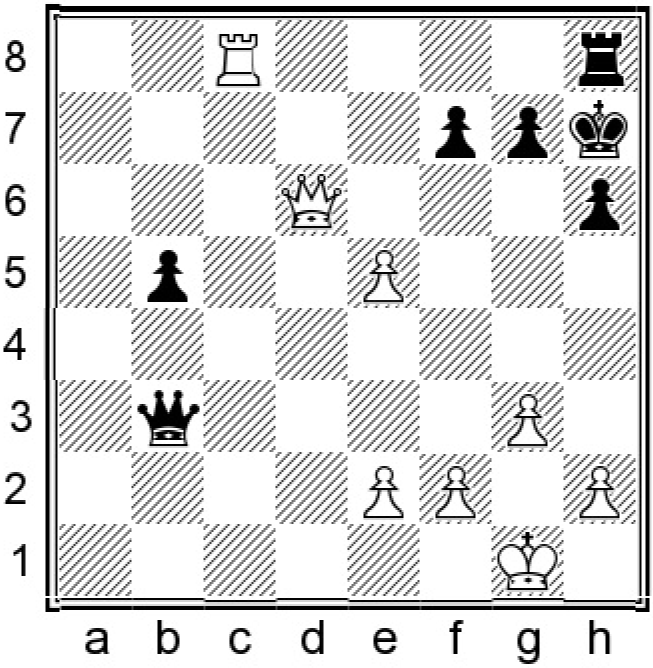
23.Bb7!

And there is no good square for the rook along the bank rank.

23...h6

23...Rf8 transposes to the previous line after 24.Bd5!.

24.Bxc8 Bxc8 25.Nxb5 axb5 26.Rxc8+ Kh7



White has not only recovered his pawn, he is even a pawn up, but the game is far from over yet.

Exercise: How should White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.Rc1!

The right thing to do, as the rook is needed to stop the b-pawn.

27...Re8 28.Kg2 Kg8 29.Rc5 Qa2?

This is the decisive mistake. It loses the b5-pawn, but not at the expense of the e2-pawn as Black wants.

30.Qc6!

Winning another pawn, after 30...Rb8 31.Rxb5, with a sure technical win at the end: a technique Portisch didn't want to test.

1–0

Carlsen played this game with the purpose of grabbing the initiative very soon, sacrificing an exchange. It was an attractive idea and good from the practical point of view, but it was not a forced sacrifice.

Maybe in his more mature years Carlsen would have chosen the quieter and stronger alternative 14.Bxd5.

The battle turned out to be very complex, with more chances to commit mistakes from both sides. In that field the teenage Carlsen outplayed Lajos Portisch, the legendary "Hungarian Botvinnik".

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It is very important to know the typical ideas of the setup one plays. (8.b3!)

2.) After a sacrifice which gives better development, it is urgent to pressurize the opponent's position, without allowing an easy continuation to solve his problems. (10.Ne5!, 12.Rd1!)

3.) Sometimes the objectively strongest continuation (*14.*B*xd5!*) can be of the same strength as an unexpected continuation. (14.Rxd5! with the idea 15.b4!).

4.) We know mistakes are almost always made in complex positions; it is necessary to remain vigilant to notice unexpected opportunities for defence and counterattack. (*16...*Q*d4!*)

5.) The attacking side must not forget that sometimes it is necessary to stop the attack and defend. (27.Rc1!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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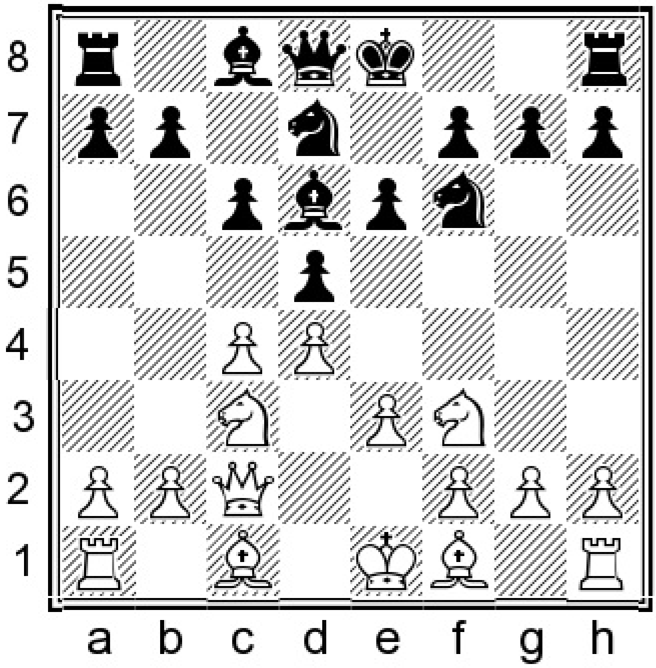
Game 3

Magnus Carlsen – Viswanathan Anand

Queen’s Gambit [D45]

Ciudad de Linares (6), 25.02.2009

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e3 e6 5.Nf3 Nbd7 6.Qc2 Bd6



7.g4!

Carlsen chooses to play one of the sharpest lines against this variation of the Queen’s Gambit, going into terrain where Anand had yet almost no playing experience, though of course he knew it in depth, as we can expect from a World Champion.

7...Nxg4

It is curious that, before this game, Anand had this position at the board only twice, first against Radjabov in Mainz 2006 (rapid) when he replied 7...h6, and after that he had it again once in a blitz game.

8.Rg1 Qf6 9.Rxg4 Qxf3 10.Rxg7 Nf6 11.h3

An idea revitalised by Aronian at the time, avoiding ...Ng4 and protecting the h2-pawn.

The blitz game mentioned above saw a quick finish. Mamedyarov – Anand, Moscow, Tal Memorial 2013, continued with the automatic 11.Bd2?, and Black fulfilled his threat, 11...Ng4!. After that, surprisingly, White's position is already very bad. The game continued 12.Nd1 Nxh2 13.Bg2 Qf6 14.Rxh7 Rg8! 15.Bh3 Nf3+ 16.Kf1 Ng5 17.Rh4 Nxh3 18.Rxh3 e5! 19.Rh1 Bf5 20.Qb3 dxc4 21.Qxb7 Bd3+ 22.Ke1 Qf3! 23.Qxa8+ Kd7 and there is no defence against mate, 0–1.

11...Qf5

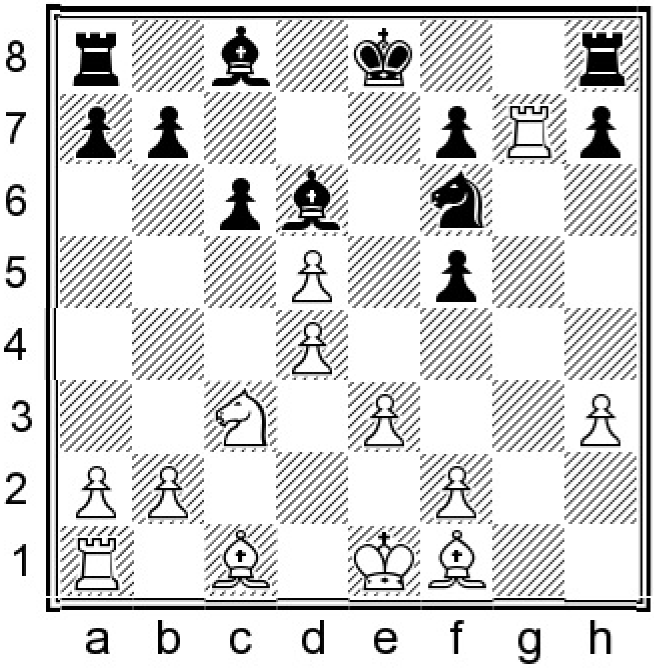
A novelty from Anand; it removes poison from White's initiative at the cost of damaging the pawn structure.

Carlsen in his brief commentary which appeared in *New In Chess* didn't agree with the criticism this move received, because the resulting positions "are close to a draw."

The game with Aronian continued 11...h6 12.Bd2 e5 and Black got a good position, Aronian – Morozevich, Morelia/Linares 2007.

The importance of playing ...h6 and taking control of g5 is seen in case Black plays 11...e5? immediately; there would follow 12.dxe5 Bxe5 13.Rg5!, threatening the e5-bishop and also 14.Bg2, when the black queen has no retreat. Black could continue 13...Nd7 14.cxd5 cxd5 15.Rf5, and after 15...Qh1 White would play 16.Bd2 followed by 0-0-0 with an overwhelming advantage.

12.Qxf5 exf5 13.cxd5



13...cxd5

Maybe 13...Nxd5 was more accurate.

Exercise: How did Carlsen try to demonstrate this capture has some drawbacks?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.Nb5!

A small step forward, as the exchange of the dark-squared bishops favours White. This could have been avoided playing 13...Nxd5.

14...Bb4+

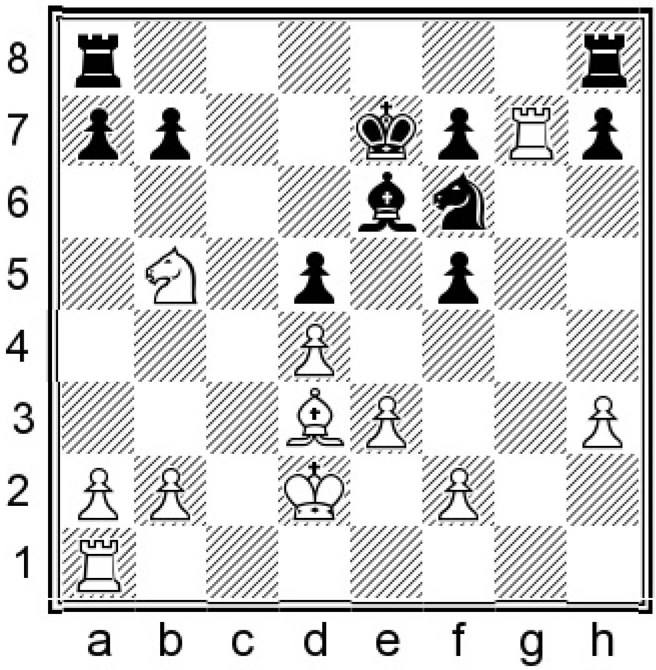
Avoiding the exchange with the retreat 14...Bf8? would be worse, as after 15.Nc7+ Ke7 16.Rg1 Rb8 17.e4! followed by Bg5 or Bf4, Black's position is in danger.

No better is 14...Kf8 15.Rg1 Be7 16.Nc7 Rb8 17.e4!, nor 14...Bb8 15.Bd2, intending Bb4, and if 15...a6? then 16.Rc1! follows.

15.Bd2 Bxd2+ 16.Kxd2

White has a small advantage after the exchange of bishops. Yet it is clear that Anand thought his position was holdable without much trouble. Carlsen also believed that White's advantage was only nominal at this point.

16...Ke7 17.Bd3 Be6



Exercise: What should he play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.Nc7!

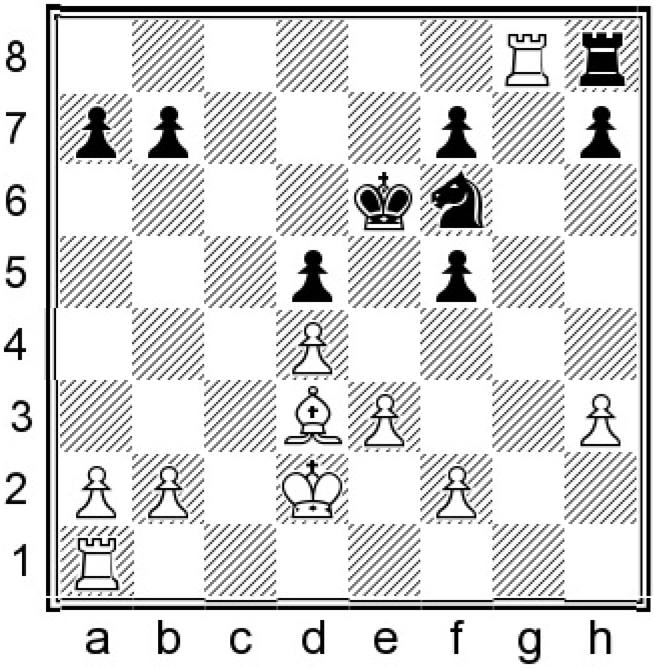
"I thought the bishop was an important defensive piece" (Carlsen).

18...Rag8 19.Nxe6

This exchange of the opponent's "bad bishop" slightly evokes Fischer – Petrosian, Buenos Aires (m/7) 1971. It is worth taking a look at that game again.

19...Kxe6 20.Rxg8

"It is better to be rich and wealthy than poor and sick", as a Russian proverb says, but we almost never have such a choice.



Exercise: How to recapture? By occupying the open file or improving the position of the knight?

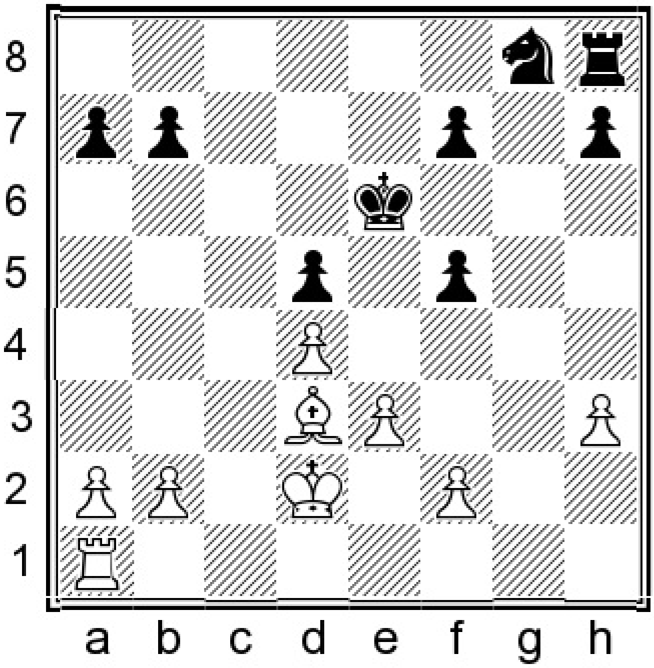
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20...Nxg8?!

“The safest move,” said Carlsen. The knight goes to e7 and the weak f5- and d5-pawns will both be defended from there.

Carlsen added he “was most afraid of 20...Rxg8 21.Rc1 Rg2 22.Ke2 Rh2, with counterplay and a likely draw.”



Exercise: How should he continue now?

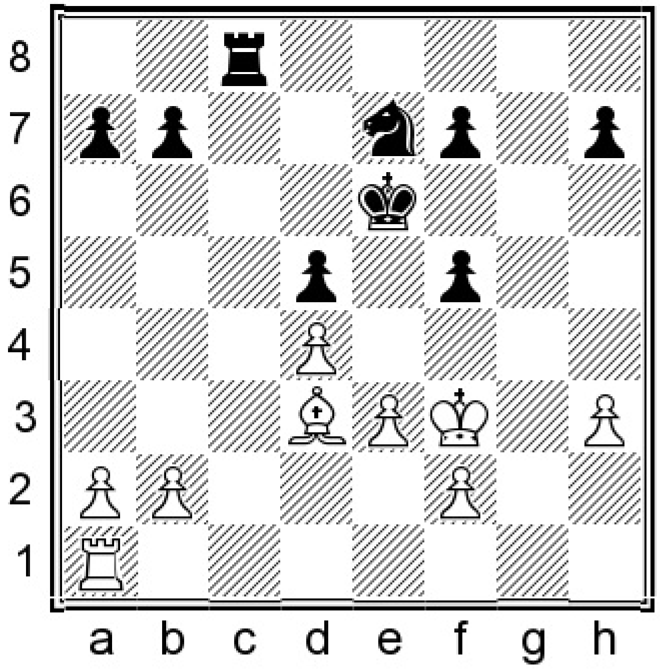
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.Ke2!

Going to the kingside. It was only optically better to infiltrate with 21.Rc1 Ne7 22.Rc7, as after 22...Rb8 followed by 23...Kd6 the invading rook must retreat.

21...Ne7 22.Kf3 Rc8



23.a4!

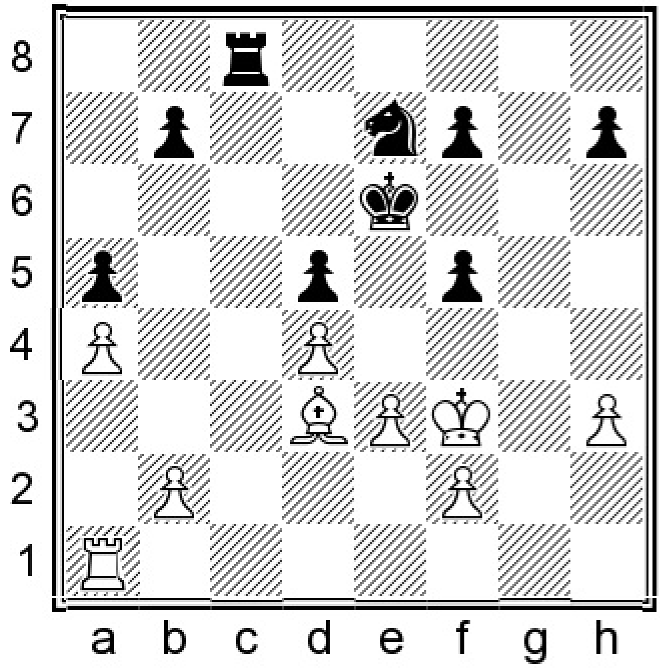
Question: Why is there an exclamation mark? Why is this advance so good?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: White’s immediate goals can only be modest. Very strong moves are not available. The idea is to diminish Black’s mobility, and the importance of this detail will be seen later.

23...Rc7

It would be weaker to stop White’s advantage by trying 23...a5.



Exercise: Why is that?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because of the manoeuvre 24.Ra3! and Rb3.

24.a5 h6 25.h4 Kf6 26.h5!

“White is in complete control now.” (Carlsen).

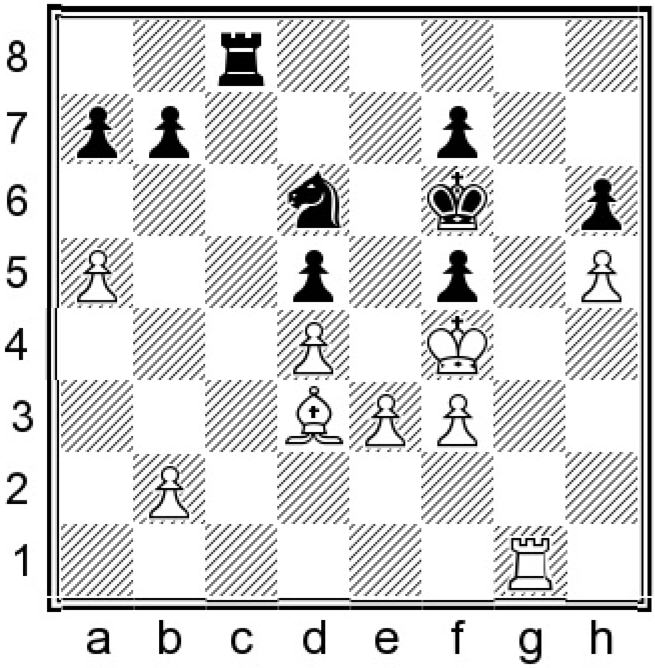
Of course, the game is still far from over, but White has the initiative. He can choose which side to play, where to press, and his king can move to f4 without fearing ...Ng6+, etc.

26...Nc8!

A good defensive move: the knight heads for a better square, d6, from where it will defend the f5-pawn as before, but it could move to e4 eventually.

26...Kg5 27.Rg1+ Kxh5?? was not possible because of 28.Kf4 followed by 29.Be2+.

27.Kf4 Nd6 28.Rg1 Rc8 29.f3



Exercise: Taking control of e4. Black is almost in zugzwang, but there are still good defensive resources. What is best now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29...Ke6?!

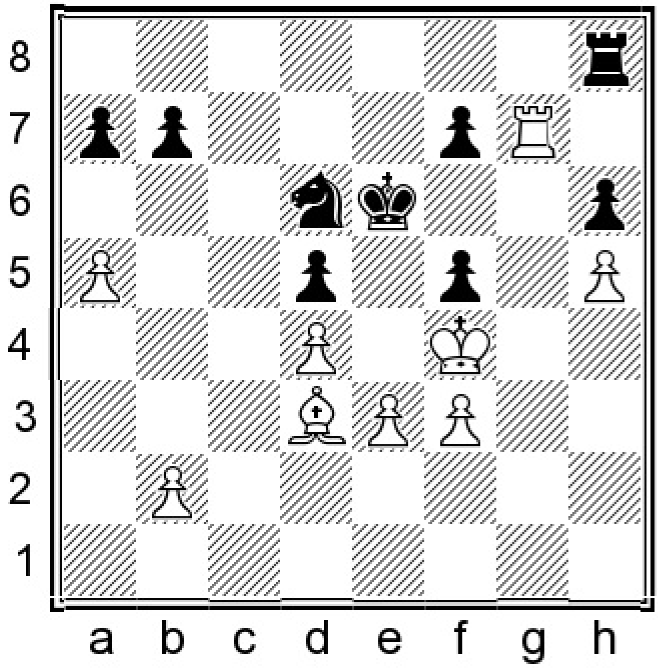
29...a6! "would probably have been enough for a draw, as it is hard to get this position with Black to move again" (Carlsen).

This objective evaluation doesn't mean that Carlsen would not continue playing for a win, trying to accumulate small advantages, which is his trademark.

30.Rg7

There was no reason to allow this penetration. The threat is 31.Rh7.

30...Rh8



Exercise: Despite Black’s previous inaccurate move, White’s advantage is minimal, and all weaknesses are defended, so how to add more pressure?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.Bc2!

As the f5-pawn is overprotected, Carlsen will put the d5-pawn under fire, which is surprisingly very strong.

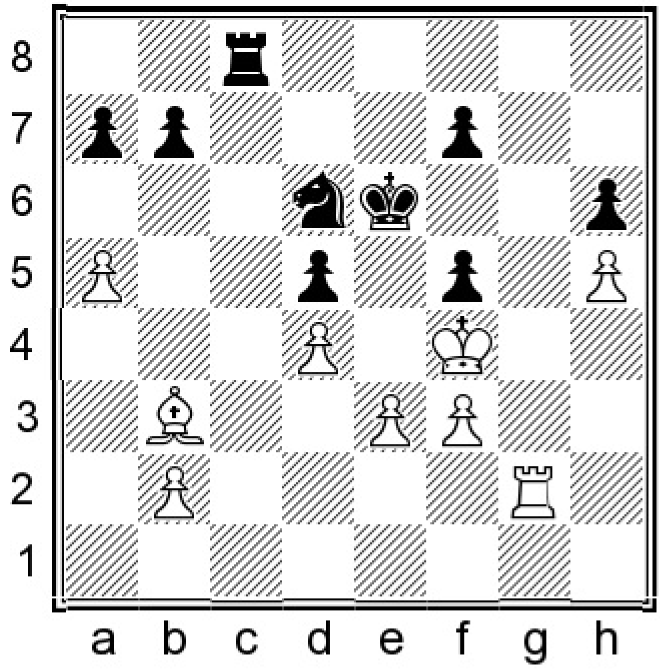
31...Rc8 32.Bb3 Rh8 33.Rg1

“Black is in zugzwang!” (Carlsen).

33...Rc8 34.Rg7 Rh8 35.Rg2

Carlsen continues with the “no rush” tactic, winning time with repetitions, and besides Black’s mobility worsens after the lost tempo.

35...Rc8



36.Rg1!

Black is almost paralyzed. His rook cannot leave the first rank because of Rg7–h7, and nor can it leave the c-file because Rc1 follows. Meanwhile, the king must defend the d5-pawn and the knight must stop e4.

36...Ne8!

"This little trick is practically the only way to play, as 36...a6 37.Rg7 Rh8 38.Rg2 Rc8 39.Rg1 is zugzwang again!" (Carlsen).

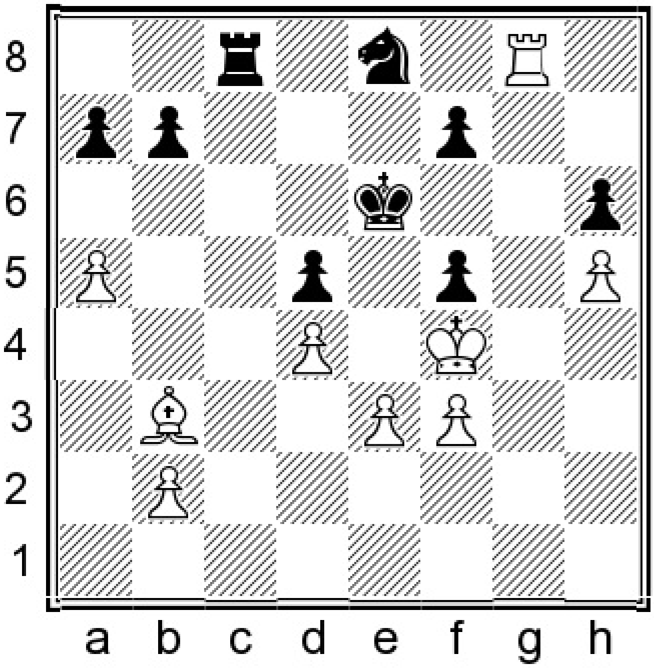
If Black plays 36...Nc4 then 37.Bxc4 dxc4 is possible (allowing the appearance of a passed pawn, but 37...Rxc4 is answered by 38.Rg8 or 38.Rg7, threatening to take on h6, and a strong passed h-pawn will appear) 38.Rg7 Rh8 39.e4, strengthening the passed d-pawn, with a clear advantage.

Finally let's see what happens if Black gives up the c-file: 36...Rh8 37.Rc1 Rc8 38.Rc5! Rxc5 39.dxc5 Nc8 40.e4 fxe4 41.fxe4 Ne7 42.exd5+ Nxd5+? 43.Ke4, winning.

37.e4

The bishop is now stronger.

Exercise (simple): 37.Rg8?? even loses, why?



Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because of the trick 37...Nf6! 38.Rxc8 Nxh5#.

37...fxe4 38.fxe4 Nf6 39.e5! Ne4

39...Nxh5+? 40.Ke3, leaves the knight trapped, and 41.Bd1 follows.

The ending which arises after 39...Rg8 40.Rxg8 Nxg8 41.Bd1! is very difficult for Black, for example: 41...Ne7 42.Bg4+ f5 43.Bh3 b6 44.a6 b5 45.Bf1 Nc6 (or 45...b4 46.Bd3) 46.Bxb5 Nxd4 47.Bd3, etc.

40.Ke3 b6?!

40...Ng5 was better, and if 41.Rf1 then 41...Ne4, defending f6. After that 42.Rxf7 could be tried, but it is not clear.

41.axb6

Now a new possibility for infiltration appears, the a-file.

41...axb6 42.Kd3

42.Bd1! was also promising. Carlsen continues to look for new zugzwang opportunities.

42...Nf2+ 43.Ke2 Ne4 44.Ke3

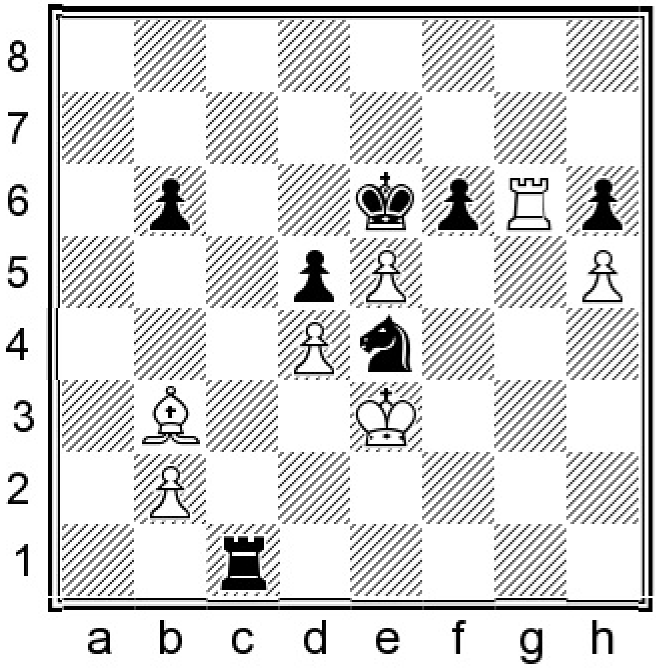
A new triangulation! “Once again, it’s hard to find a move for Black” (Carlsen).

44...f6?!

Trying to undermine the annoying e5-pawn, but it weakens g6.

44...Ng5! was more tenacious, blocking the g-file, although now, because of 40...b6, White would play 45.Ra1, retaining the upper hand.

45.Rg6 Rc1



Exercise: We are in a critical moment. What should he play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

46.Rxh6?!

A natural move, but this is the first mistake Carlsen commits.

Better was 46.exf6! Re1+ 47.Kd3 Nxf6 48.Bxd5+! Kf5 49.Bf3, with greater winning chances, as Carlsen himself admitted.

46...Rh1 47.Bc2

Black now has an unexpected chance of survival.

47...Rh3+?

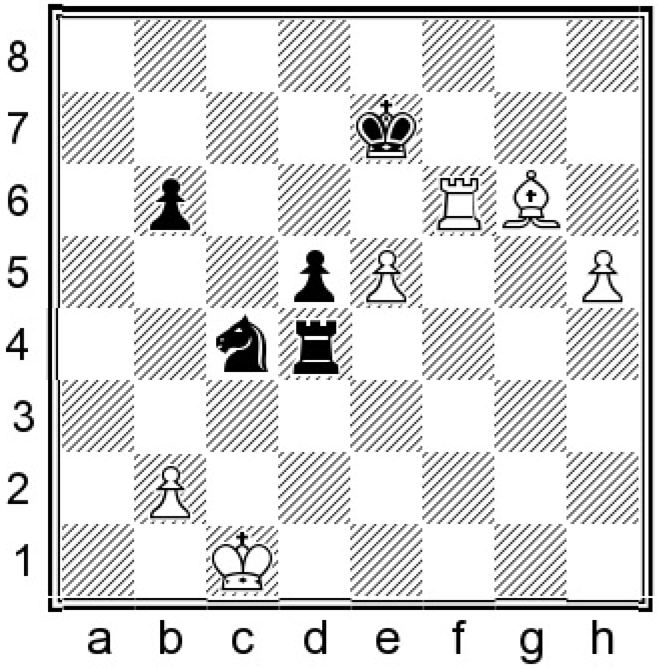
Missing the chance: 47...Re1+! “would have been better, as my intended 48.Kf3 fails to 48...Rf1+

49.Kg4 (49.Kg2?? Rf2+) 49...Rg1+, with perpetual (50.Kh3 Ng5+!). 48.Kd3 Rh1 is also rather drawish" (Carlsen), when Black intends to play 49...Rh3+ and ...Rh2+.

48.Kf4 Rh4+ 49.Kf3 Nd2+ 50.Ke2?!

Much stronger was 50.Kg3!. Then 50...Rxd4 51.Rxf6+ Kxe5 52.Rf5+ Ke6 53.h6 Rc4 54.h7 Rxc2 is unclear, but 54.Bd3! Rd4 (or 54...Rc8 55.h7 Rh8 56.Rg5 Ne4+ 57.Bxe4 dxe4 58.Rh5, and wins) 55.h7 Rxd3+ 56.Kg4 wins (Carlsen).

50...Rh2+ 51.Kd1 Nc4 52.Rxf6+ Ke7 53.Bg6 Rd2+ 54.Kc1 Rxd4



Exercise: White's advantage is now smaller, how did Carlsen retain some winning chances?

Show/Hide Solution

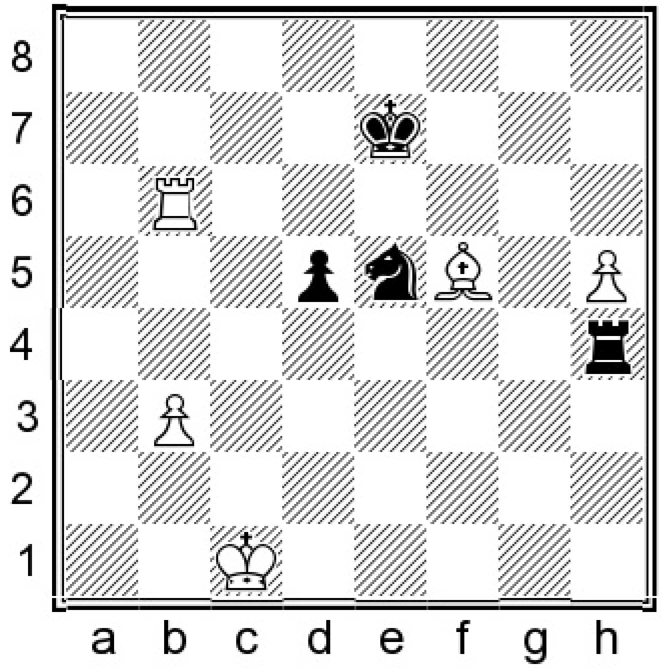
Answer:

55.b3!

Exchanging one of his pawns for the b6-pawn and getting two passed pawns again, now distant ones.

55.h6? instead is wrong: 55...Rh4! 56.Bf5 Rh1+ 57.Kc2 Ne3+ followed by 58...Nxf5 and 59...Rxh6.

55...Nxe5 56.Rxb6 Rh4 57.Bf5!



The most accurate move again; it prepares h6, with the threat 58.Re6+

Exercise: Which is the most stubborn defence?

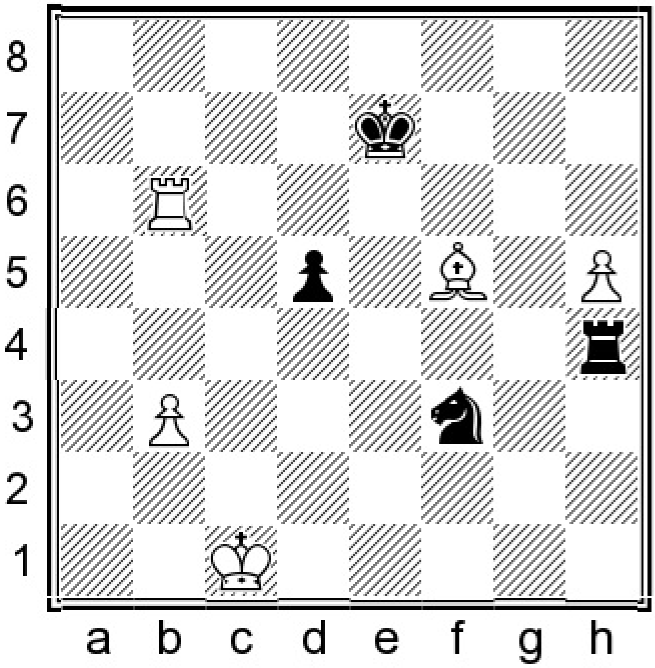
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

57...Nf3?

It was preferable to worsen the position of White’s king with 57...Rh1+!. If 58.Kd2 the artistic 58...Nc4+!! follows, then 59.bxc4 Rxh5 60.Bg6 Rh2+ reaching a theoretically drawn ending; 58.Kb2 Nc4+ is similar.

If 58.Kc2 then 58...Nf3, “and Black is hanging on” (Carlsen), as this threatens 59...Nd4+. Let’s dig a little further: 59.Bg4 Rh2+ 60.Kc3 Ng5, planning 61...Ne4–f6, and 61.Kd4 Rh4 is not enough.



Exercise: How did Carlsen proceed now?

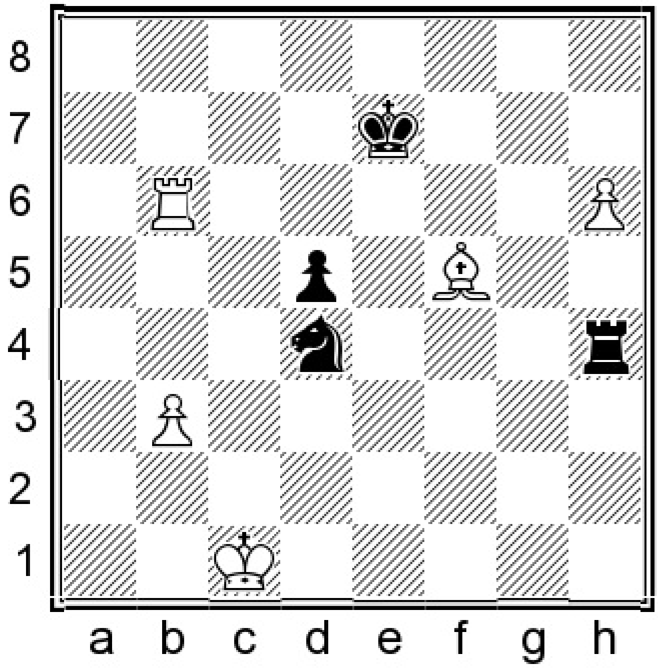
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

58.h6!

Of course, a step further! This greatly improves his position.

58...Nd4



Exercise: Now Carlsen finishes the game artistically, how?

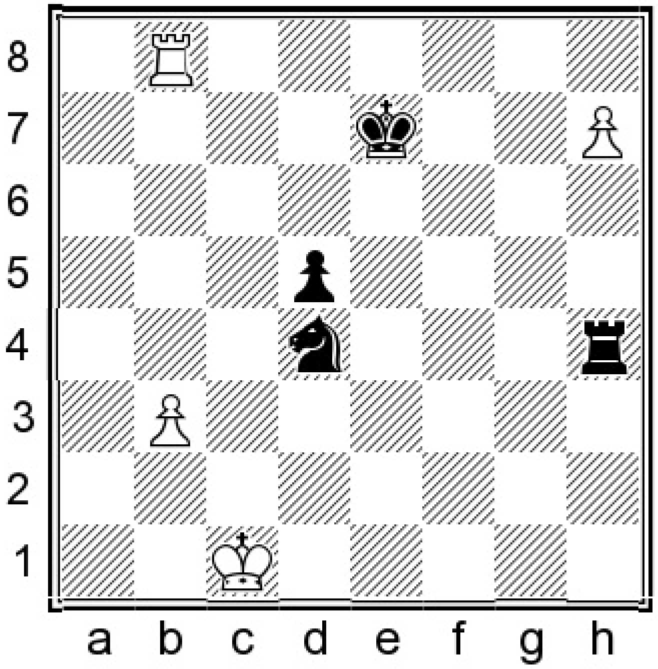
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

59.h7!

Not 59.Bd3? Nxb3+.

59...Nxf5 60.Rb8! Nd4



Exercise: A precise move is still required, which one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

61.Kb2!

The only winning move, keeping the b-pawn.

Not 61.b4? Nc6 and it is a draw.

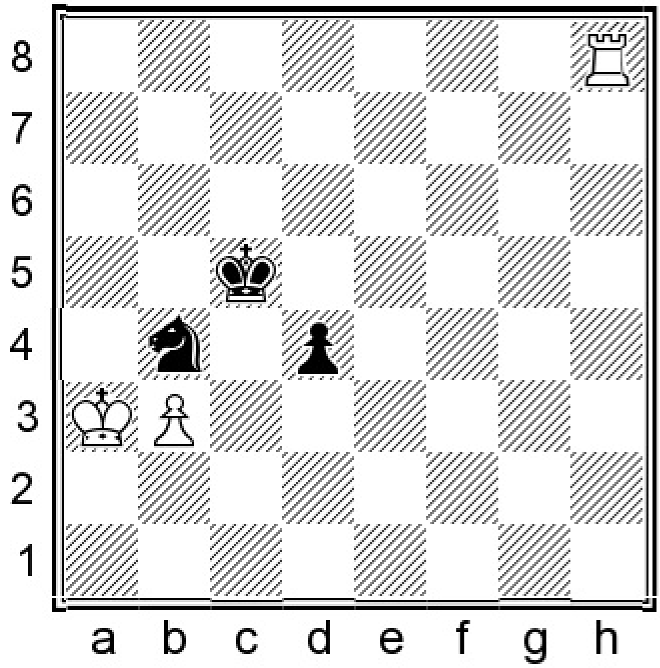
61...Kd6

Not yet 61...Rxh7? because of 62.Rb7+.

62.h8=Q Rxh8 63.Rxh8

“Now White is winning, but it’s still not easy” (Carlsen).

63...Kc5 64.Rh5 Nc6 65.Rh4 Nb4 66.Ka3 d4 67.Rh5+ Nd5 68.Kb2 Kc6 69.Ka3 Kc5 70.Rh4 Nb4 71.Rh8



71...Nc6?!

“71...Nc2+ (or 71...Nd5) would have kept the game going longer” (Carlsen).

72.Rh5+ Kd6 73.b4

Now it’s simpler, or “Chess is easy again”, as Najdorf would say.

73...d3 74.Rh3 Ne5 75.Kb3 d2 76.Kc2 Nc6 77.Rh4

1–0

This titanic battle brought Carlsen his first win against the then World Champion in classical games.

Without counting blitz or rapid games, Anand had a categorical 4-0 score against Carlsen until this game.

Carlsen got only a small advantage after the opening, but he prevailed after long manoeuvres, changing advantages. The final mistakes from both sides make the game even more interesting, and the victory more worthy.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It is very useful to ask oneself “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” (14.Nb5! 18.Nc7!)

2.) “Which piece can I improve?” is a question you should keep asking yourself. (21.Ke2! 31.Bc2!)

3.) Any change, material or structural, needs careful analysis so you can be sure it really helps your position. (40...b6? 46.Rxh6?!)

4.) It is important to watch out for tactical opportunities that could appear. (*46.exf6!* 47...Rh3+? 57...Nf3?)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 4

Magnus Carlsen – Veselin Topalov

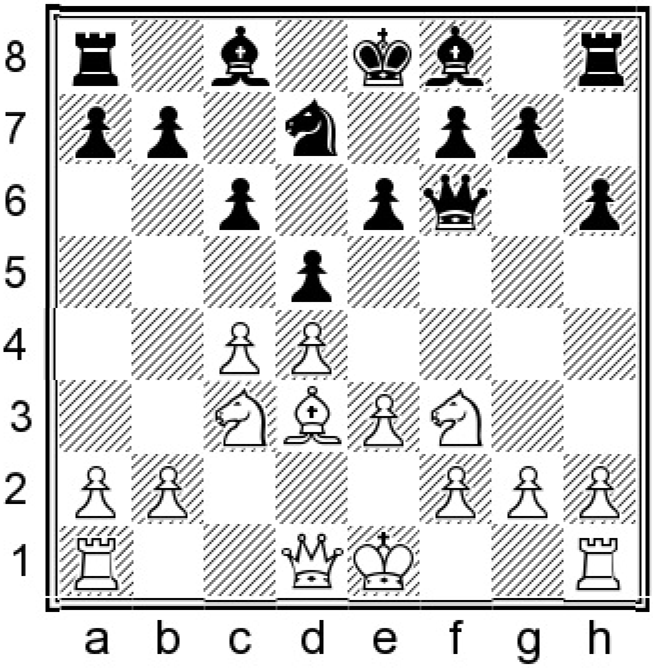
Queen's Gambit [D43]

MTel Masters Sofia (1) 2009

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 e6 5.Bg5 h6 6.Bxf6

Carlsen doesn't like the pawn sacrifice after 6.Bh4 dxc4 7.e4 g5 8.Bg3 b5, which is sharper.

6...Qxf6 7.e3 Nd7 8.Bd3



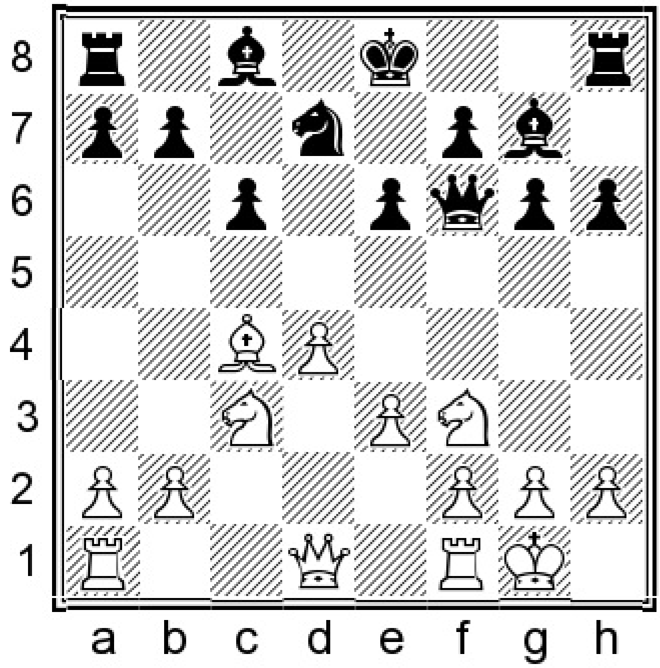
8...dxc4

Question: I would think there are several options, why did Black choose this capture?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black opens the h1-a8 diagonal as a first step to activate the most passive piece, his light-squared bishop. He intends ...b6 or ...b5 and ...Bb7 will follow. Black will try to play ...c5 later; a great part of the fight will revolve around this advance.

9.Bxc4 g6 10.0-0 Bg7



Exercise: What should he play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

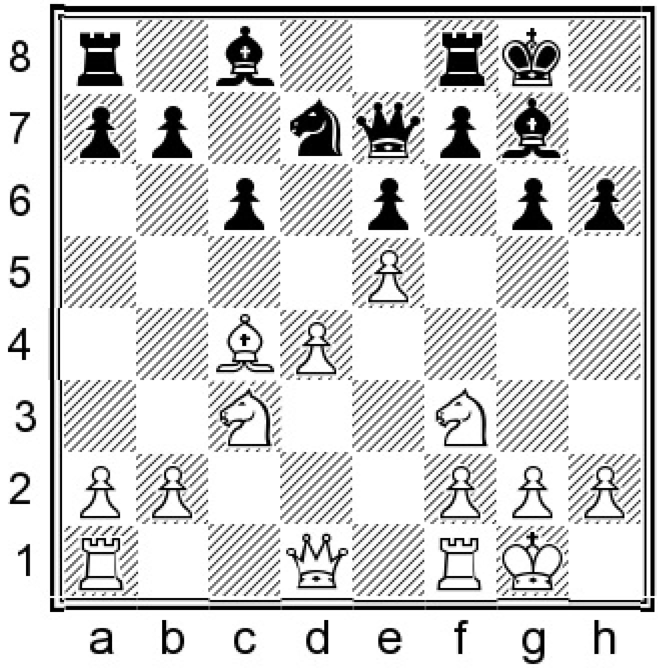
11.e4

White has more space and Black has the two bishops, but they are not very active now; there is no reason to reject this central advance.

11...0-0

Another option is 11...e5 12.d5 Nb6. “The text usually leads to more complicated play, so it’s no surprise that Topalov went for it” (Carlsen).

12.e5 Qe7



Exercise: There are several possibilities, which one was chosen by Carlsen?

Show/Hide Solution

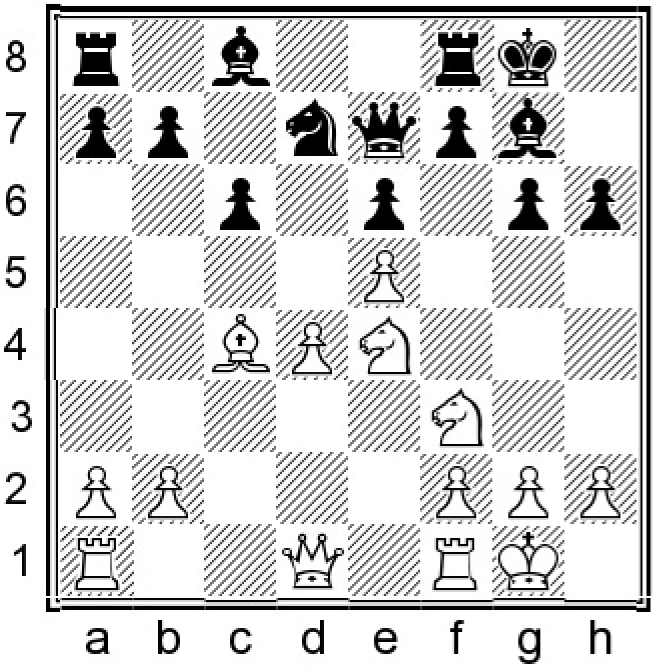
Answer:

13.Qe2

Defending e5 once more, in order to be able to answer a future ...c5 with d5, with the e5-pawn well defended.

The main alternative, with a similar idea, is 13.Re1.

Exercise: 13.Ne4?! instead, trying to occupy d6 immediately, would be inaccurate, but why?



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Answer: Because Black counterattacks with 13...c5!, and 14.d5? fails to 14...Nxe5.

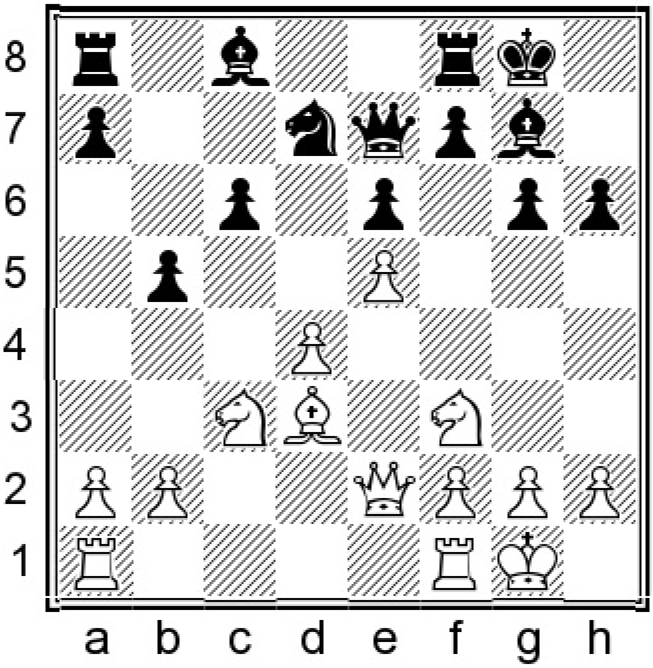
13...b5

Now 13...c5?! is premature, since White could answer 14.d5 (14.Rad1 cxd4 15.Rxd4 Qc5 is less clear), where the best chance seems to be the unconvincing sacrifice 14...Nxe5.

What Topalov played is not the most common continuation. “Black usually takes a more restrained approach by playing ...b6 here or on the next move. The text is probably not bad either, however” (Carlsen).

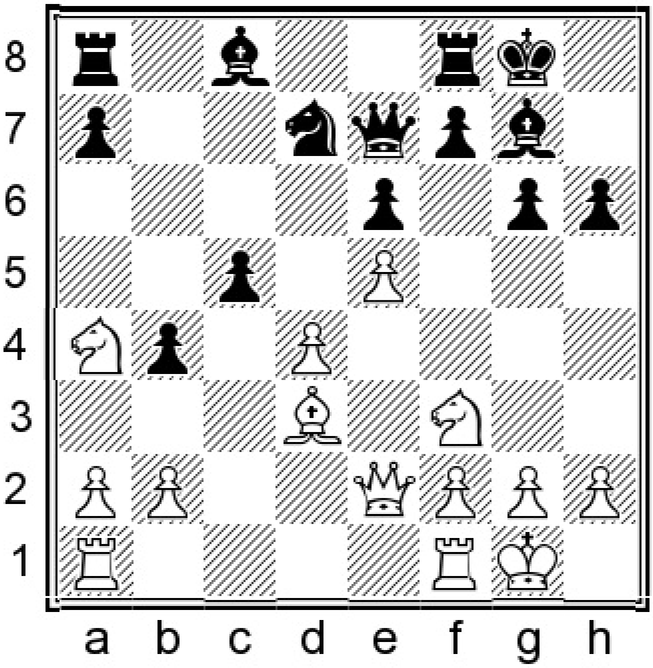
Topalov is not afraid of the weakness created on c5 if he gets active play.

14.Bd3



14...Bb7

"An interesting but risky alternative was 14...b4 15.Na4 c5" (Carlsen).



Exercise: Black would have then achieved the ...c5 break, how should White play in this case?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: As Carlsen said, nothing special is achieved by 16.Be4 Rb8 17.Nxc5 Nxc5 18.dxc5 Qxc5 19.Rfc1 Qa5.

It is better to try to take advantage of the c-file by playing 16.Rac1!, e.g. 16...cxd4 17.Qe4 Rb8 18.Rc7, “with the initiative” (Carlsen). If 17...Nb6 then 18.Nxb6 Bb7 19.Nxa8 Bxe4 20.Bxe4 is unclear, and after 20...d3 (or prefaced by 20...Qd7), Black’s queen activates quickly, without allowing easy coordination of White’s forces.

However, White would play 18.Nc5 Rd8 19.Rc2 followed by Rfc1, and he has more space. The d4-pawn can be captured at any moment, and the g7-bishop is blocked in.

Exercise: What did Carlsen do after 14...Bb7?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15.Be4!

The fight between neutralizing and reinforcing the move ...c5 continues.

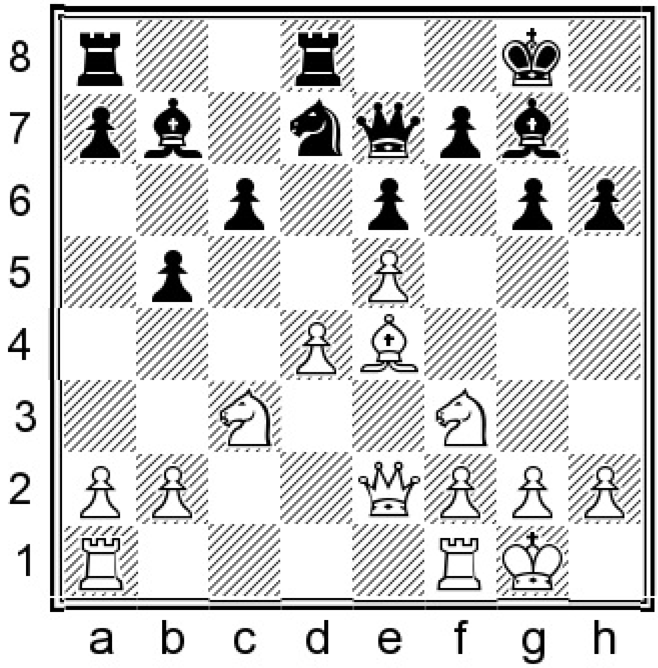
Again, 15.Ne4?! would be answered by 15...c5! 16.Bxb5 cxd4 and Black, with active play, has no problems.

15.Rac1 would also be met by 15...c5!.

15...Rfd8?!

It is often difficult to find the best place for the rooks, and this is one of those cases.

“The rook is maybe needed on c8 soon. 15...Rab8 immediately was better” (Carlsen). It seems very logical to defend the b7-bishop, preparing an eventual ...c5, and Topalov could not justify his choice later.



Exercise: What do you think Carlsen replied?

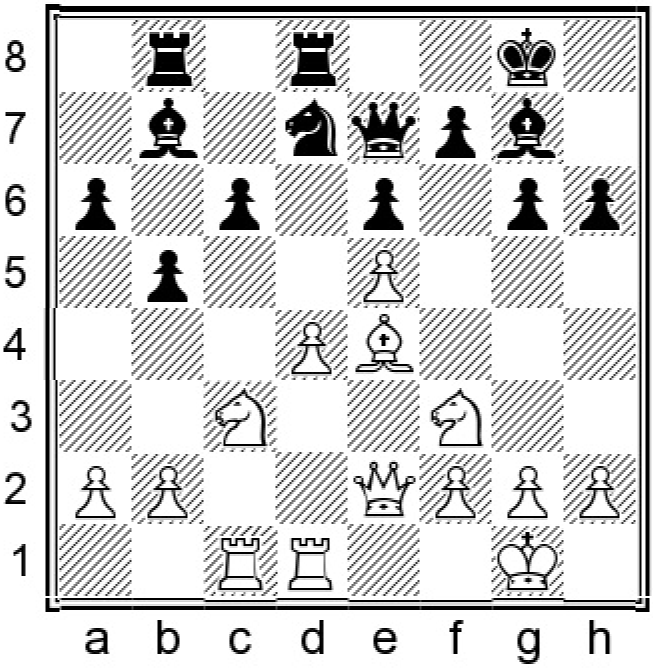
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Rac1

Adding more pressure on c6. Trying to take advantage of the pin on the long diagonal with 16.Nxb5?! was not promising due to 16...Nxe5!

16...Rab8 17.Rfd1 a6



Exercise: Black has taken all necessary steps before playing ...c5. What should White do now?

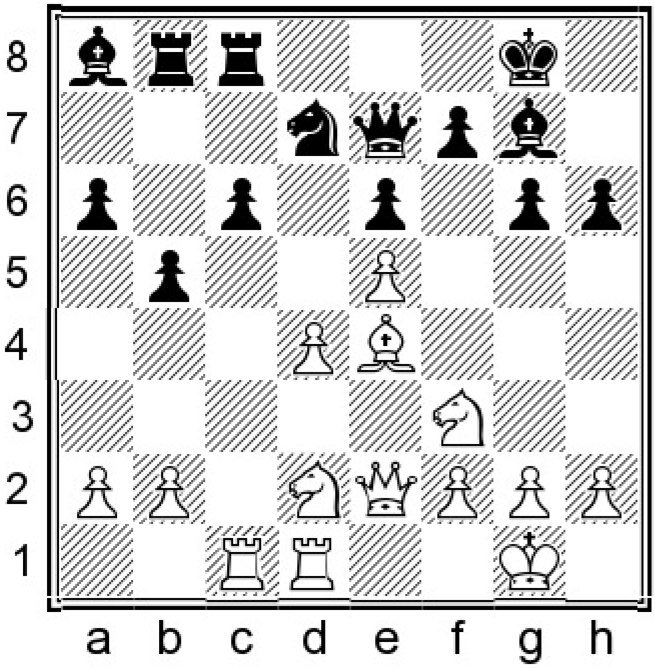
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.h4

Carlsen opens a new front, trying to create weaknesses in Black’s position, as he sees no further scope for progress on the queenside.

The best engines found a better solution (even those of 2009 when the game was played): 18.Nb1! Carlsen said this was a common plan in such a structure, with the obvious idea of Nd2–b3. 18...Rdc8 19.Nbd2 Ba8 could follow.



Exercise: Carlsen looked at this, but he didn't play it because he couldn't make it work tactically. How should he continue this variation?

Show/Hide Solution

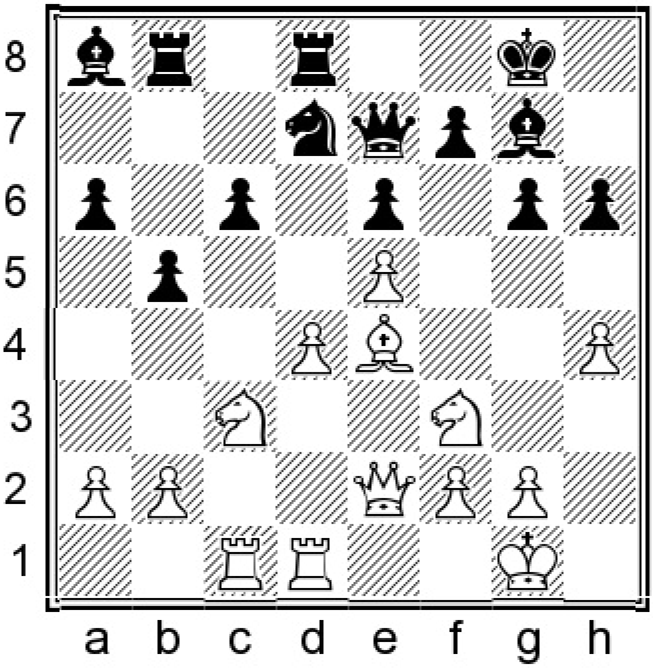
Answer: Carlsen analysed 20.Nb3 c5 21.Bxa8 Rxa8 with equality. Black was able to play ...c5 in good conditions, which is what discouraged Carlsen from playing 18.Nb1!.

But 20.Qe3! is much stronger, "a great preparatory move, shown by the engines," then 20...c5 21.Bxa8 Rxa8 22.Ne4, "and since 22...cxd4 can now be met by 23.Qxd4, White has a clear initiative" (Carlsen); the e5-pawn is well defended and the d6-square is available.

18...Ba8

Topalov prefers to continue waiting. He was not convinced by 18...c5 19.Bxb7 Rxb7 20.d5, or prefaced with 20.h5 in order to play d5 in better conditions after weakening Black's kingside. But in the latter case Black can play 20...cxd4.

It is not clear that delaying ...c5 with 18...Ba8 was a better choice.



Exercise: There are several moves and plans, what would you choose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.Rc2

Carlsen chooses to double rooks on the c-file, but later he thought it was probably a little slow.

He suggested 19.h5 g5 20.Nh2 “with the idea of putting the knight on the excellent square g4,” but Black can play 20...c5!, so the preparatory move 20.Qe3! looks better, as it stops ...c5, with the idea of playing 21.Nh2.

19.a3 is also interesting, to play b4 trying to avoid ...c5 permanently, as after 19...c5?! 20.Bxa8 Rxa8 21.d5 c4 22.d6 Qe8 23.Qe3, White is a little better.

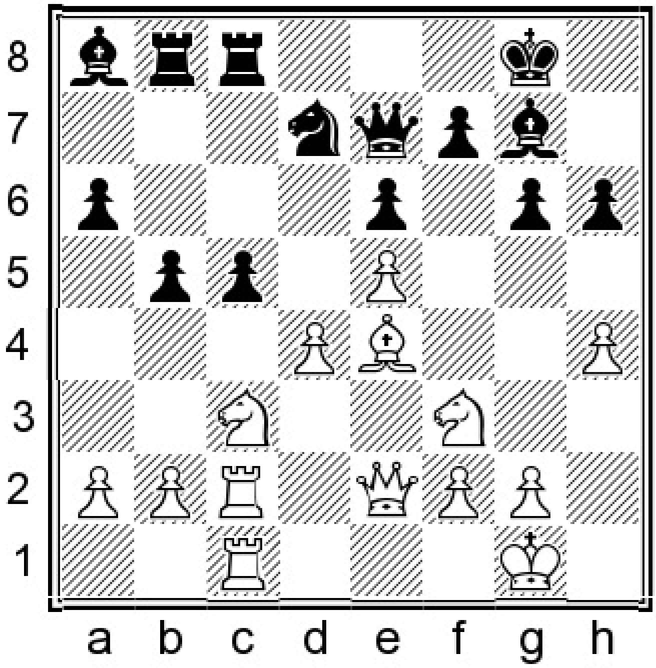
19...Rdc8

A different idea was 19...Nb6 and then ...Nd5, but this is not what Black is playing for.

19...c5?! instead is unattractive, as there could follow 20.Bxa8 Rxa8 21.d5 c4 (21...exd5? 22.Nxd5 is worse, when 22...Qe6 loses to 23.Nc7, while if 22...Qf8 then 23.e6! is strong) 22.d6, etc.

20.Rdc1 Qf8!

Question: Is this so good? Isn’t this the right moment to play ...c5?



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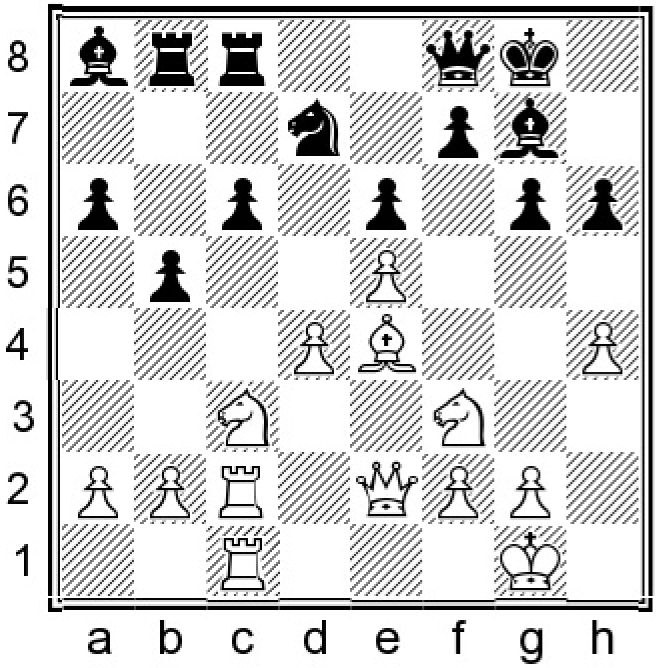
Answer: Not yet, as after 20...c5 21.Bxa8 Rxa8 22.Ne4 “the pin on the c-file causes Black problems” (Carlsen); we could add the jump to d6.

It wouldn’t be good to try 20...Rc7 21.a3 Rbc8, because there would follow 22.b4! Nb6 23.h5! and White has achieved everything: stopping the...c5 break, and taking the initiative on the kingside.

Topalov played a good prophylactic move. The queen overprotects the c8-rook and evades attack after Nxd5. We have seen the sequence ...c5 followed by d5 exd5 and Nxd5 several times.



21.a4?!

Carlsen criticized his move, honestly commenting: “I was not sure what to do here and decided to try and disturb his queenside play a little.”

The interim move 21.h5 g5 must be considered (21...gxh5?! gains little for Black and weakens his structure), but after the eventual sequence we saw (...c5 answered by d5), it is necessary to consider a possible ...g4, and the e5-pawn loses its protection.

Like before, 21.Qe3! was the best choice, then 21...c5 22.Bxa8 Rxa8 (not 22...cxd4?? as after 23.Qxd4 the black knight is attacked) 23.d5, with our familiar white advantage.

21...c5?!

And Carlsen’s decision turns good, as this is what Black was planning over many moves as we know, and this moment is not the best one.

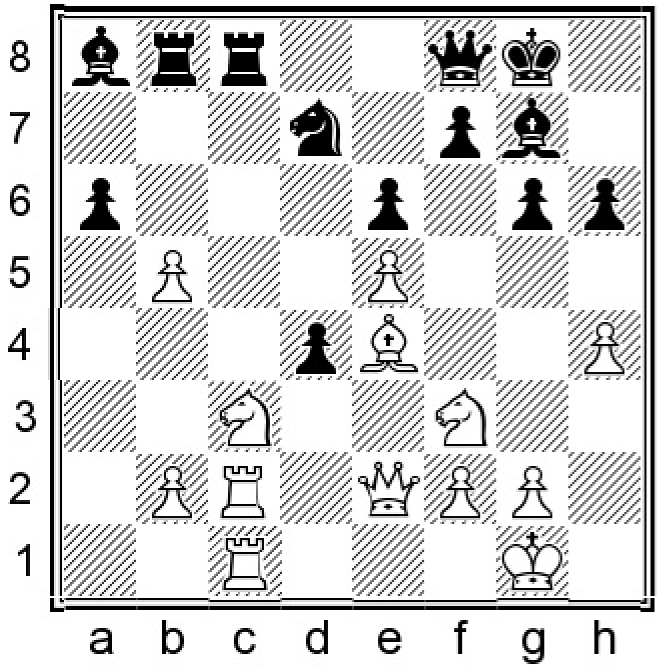
There was a cleverer order, with the same idea. Black could improve his chances by inserting 21...b4!, as there is no Na4 anymore, and after 22.Nb1 (22.Nd1 is similar) finally 22...c5! is good, e.g. 23.Bxa8 Rxa8 24.dxc5 Rxc5 25.Nbd2 Rxc2 26.Rxc2 Rc8. Black has not only put his troubles behind him, but he “even has a slight initiative, thanks to the weaknesses on e5 and a4,” Carlsen said later, and he was surprised that both players missed this line.

22.axb5

“White is better again,” said Carlsen, as he punishes Black’s omission of ...b4 and now starts complications. It was also attractive to play in a simpler way: 22.Bxa8 Rxa8 23.d5, and White has a small advantage.

22...cxd4

Not 22...axb5? 23.Bxa8 cxd4 (or 23...Rxa8 24.Nxb5) 24.Nxb5 Rxc2 25.Rxc2, a healthy pawn up.



Exercise: Which is the most precise recapture?

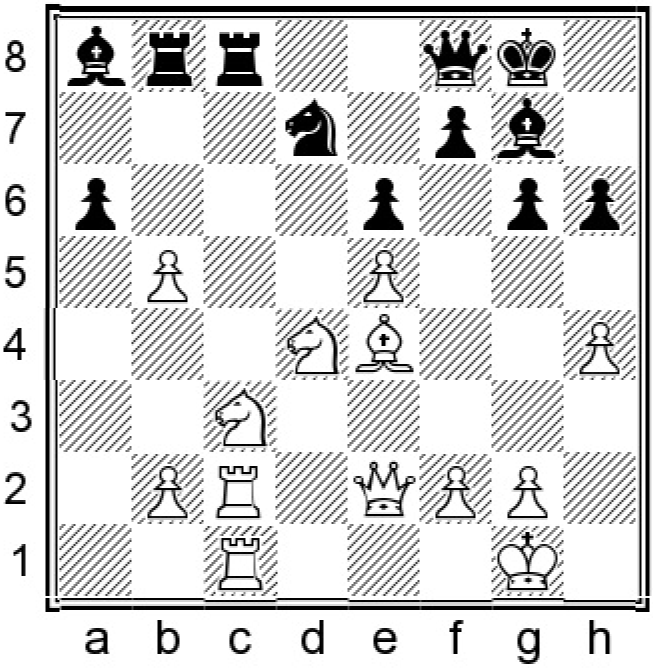
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23.Nxd4!

Better than inserting 23.Bxa8 Rxa8, as after 24.Nxd4 Nxe5 25.bxa6 Qd6, Black gets his pawn back with excellent play, and now that the e5 pawn is gone the g7-bishop is strong.

We arrive at a critical position.



23...Bxe4?

Question: Is that bad? I see it deflects the c3-knight away from b5.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The knight will be further from b5, that's right, but it will be very active on e4 and its role on the kingside will be decisive.

Carlsen called it "a huge mistake, probably based on a tactical oversight."

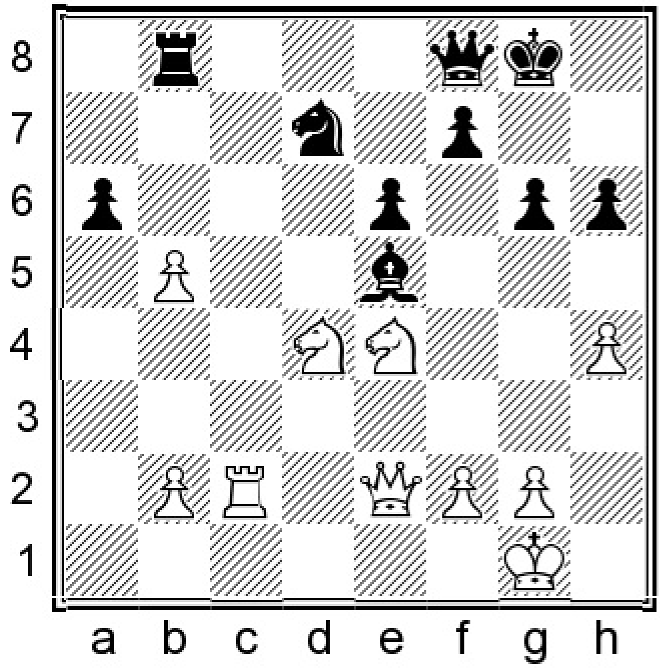
He suggested 23...axb5 24.Bxa8 Rxa8 instead, which "would have kept White out of c6 for now, and retained decent chances of counterplay after 25.f4 Qd8!, with ideas like ...Nxe5 and ...g5."

24.Nxe4 Rxc2

Now 24...axb5 loses to 25.Nc6 and 26.Ne7+.

25.Rxc2 axb5

Carlsen thought 25...Bxe5 was Topalov's intention, when the bishop is strong again.



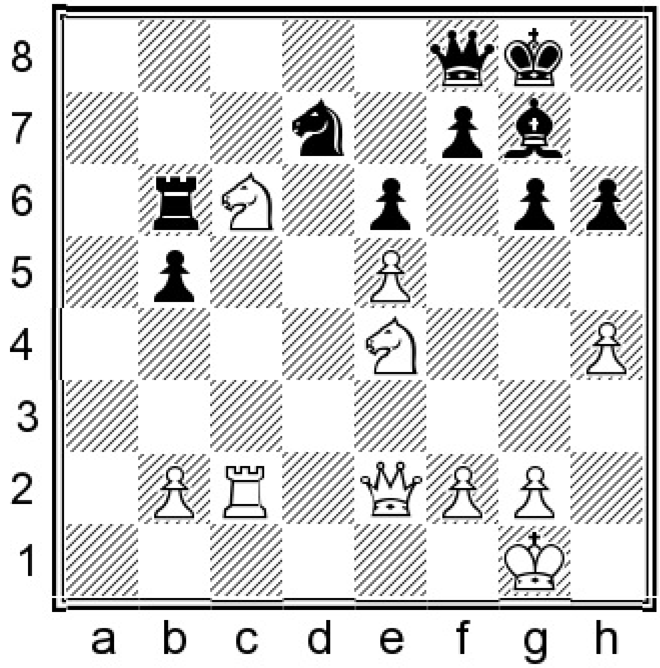
Exercise: Why didn't he play it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because White gains material after 26.Nc6 Rxb5 27.Rd2!; if 27...Qe8 then, among other moves, there could follow 28.f4! Bxf4? 29.Rxd7, or 28...Bxb2 29.Nd6.

And besides, "26.Rd2! is actually even better" (Carlsen).

26.Nc6 Rb6



An ugly square, but necessary to defend the b-pawn.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.f4

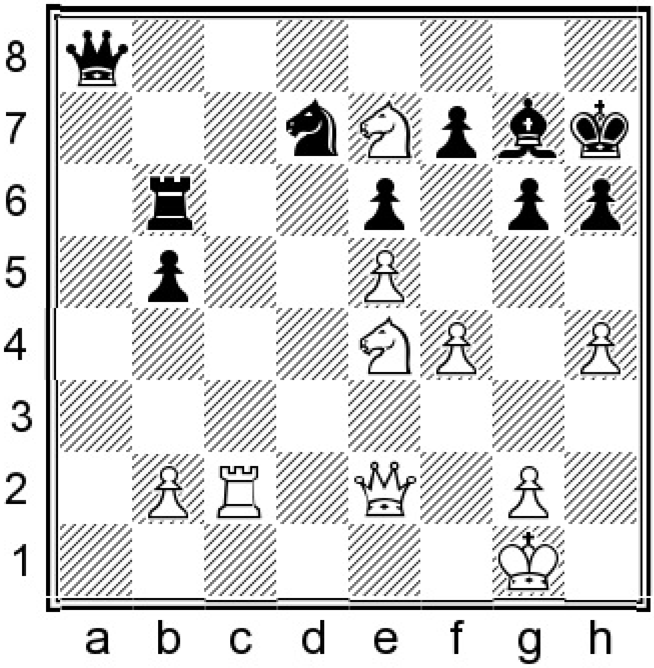
Black's passivity is now very worrying.

27...Qa8

27...Nb8 28.Na7! "is aesthetically pleasing and more or less decisive" (Carlsen).

28.Ne7+ Kh7

Not 28...Kf8?? 29.Rc8+.



Exercise: What now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.h5

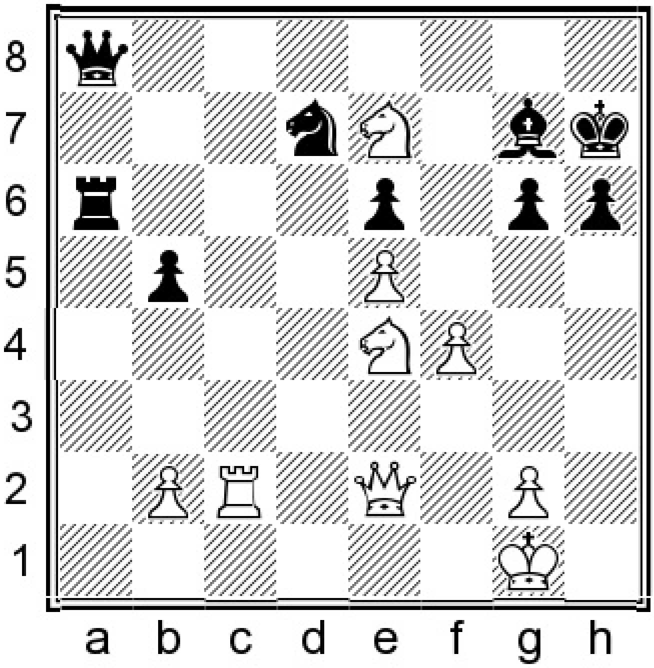
The latent threat makes its appearance in an ideal moment, and the weaknesses created on g6 will be decisive.

29...Ra6

“The only active move Black can play” (Carlsen).

29...Qd8 is refuted by 30.hxg6+ fxg6 31.Nxg6! Kxg6 32.Qd3 Kf7 33.Rd2 Ke8 (or 33...Rb7 34.Nd6+) 34.Nc5, etc.

30.hxg6+ fxg6



Exercise: Carlsen played the strongest move, which one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.Rc7!

Taking full control of the seventh rank with X-ray pressure on the black monarch. The game is objectively over but... there are always some chances to fight. (Lasker, remember?).

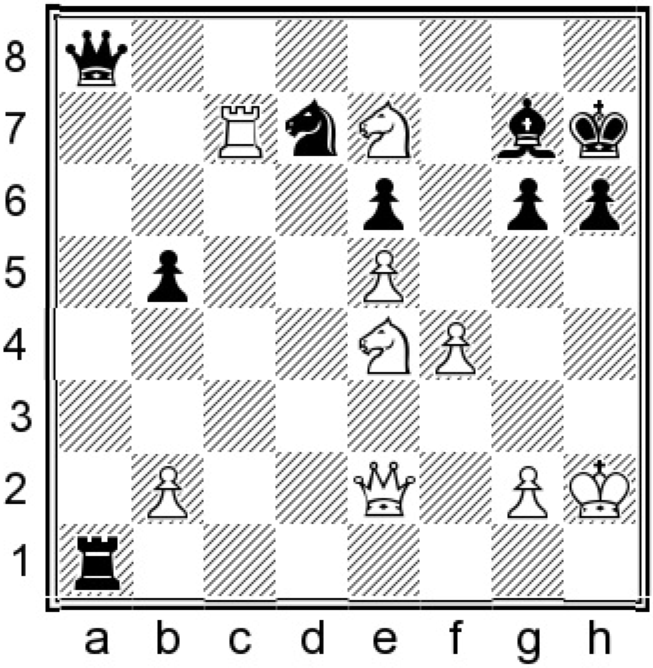
31...Ra1+

31...Nxe5? fails to the simple 32.fxe5 Ra1+ 33.Kf2!, or even better 32.Nf6+! Bxf6 33.Nd5+ Bg7 34.Qxe5.

32.Kf2?!

“But now there is some excitement again” (Carlsen), as this gives some chances, at least practical ones.

What Carlsen plays is winning, but there were fewer complications after the natural 32.Kh2!.



Carlsen thought that gave Black unnecessary counterplay after 32...Nxe5, but it fails to the pretty continuation 33.Nf6+! Bxf6 34.Nd5+ Bg7 35.Qxe5 Qf8 36.Rxg7+ Qxg7 37.Nf6+, winning.

32...Ra4 was no better because of 33.Nf6+ Nxf6 34.exf6 Bxf6 35.Nc8+ Kh8 36.Qxe6 and a quick mate.

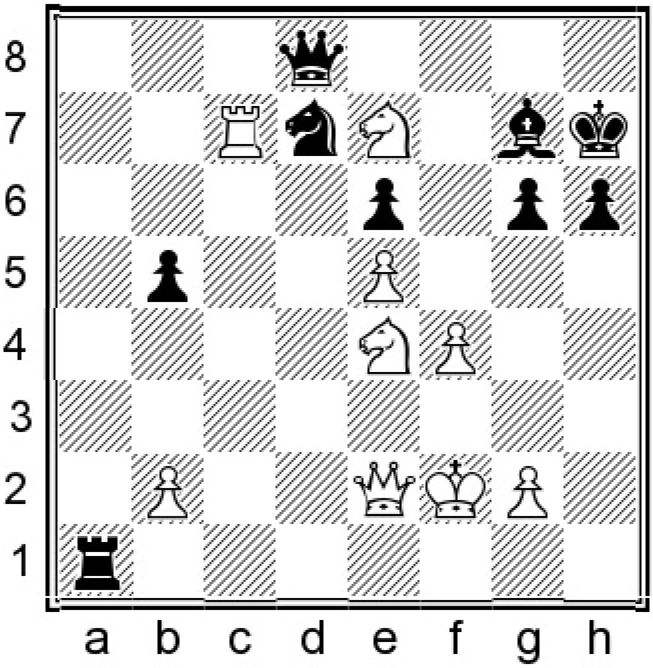
32...Qd8 attacks two pieces, and if the knight retires ...Qh4# follows, but the weakness of Black’s king is evident after 33.Qd3!, e.g. 33...Qxe7 34.Nf6+! Bxf6 35.exf6, winning, or 33...Qxc7 which receives mate in four moves after 34.Ng5+ hxg5 (or 34...Kh8 35.Nf7+ Kh7 36.Qxg6#) 35.Qxg6+ Kh8 36.Qh5+ and mate.

Finally, if 32...Ra7 then 33.Qd3! Rxc7 34.Ng5+ wins.

32...Qd8

This move seems to threaten everything again, but Carlsen was of course ready for it.

It was possible to continue the fight with 32...Ra4!, although White retains a huge advantage after 33.Nc6 (the king on f2 now prevents 33.Nf6+? Nxf6 34.exf6 because 34...Rxf4+ is with check) 33...Kh8 34.Kg3!, followed by Nd6 or Qd3, etc.



Exercise (easy): What had Carlsen in mind for this attack?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

33.Qd3!

“This is the trick” (Carlsen). We have already seen this beautiful answer, which profits from the weakness of the black king, eyeing g6 and h3.

33...Qxe7

As we saw, 33...Qxc7 loses to 34.Ng5+! hxg5 (or 34...Kh8 35.Nf7+ Kh7 36.Qxg6#) 35.Qxg6+ Kh8 36.Qh5+ and mate to follow.

34.Rxd7

34.Nf6+ was equally strong.

34...Qh4+ 35.Kf3 Qh5+

If 35...Kh8 then 36.Rxg7 Kxg7 is possible (White was threatening 37.Rg8+ or 37.Rh7+ and Nf6+) 37.Nf6 Ra7 38.Qd8 wins.

36.Kg3

“Black has no more checks and his king has no protection, so he resigned. A great way to start the tournament!" (Carlsen).

1–0

Carlsen obtained a slight edge after the opening, with an advantage in space.

When the manoeuvring phase arrived, Carlsen played on both flanks. The ...c5 break was always on the table, but Black didn't choose the best opportunity to play it. Carlsen increased his advantage and he finally won by attacking.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) "If one piece is bad, the whole position is bad." In this game a great part of the fight revolved around the activation of Black's light-squared bishop. (21...c5? *21...b4!* followed by *22...c5!*)

2.) "Prophylactic thinking", i.e. anticipating the opponent's ideas. Keep asking yourself "what is he threatening?" (*21.*Q*e3!* or 20...Qf8!, which partially neutralized the pressure on the c-file)

3.) "Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?" The right answer to these questions can tip the balance in favour of one side or the other. (23...Bxe4?)

4.) Creating "tactical weaknesses" in the enemy camp is an important tool for making progress. (29.h5! seriously weakened Black's castled position)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Show in Text Mode

Game 5

Magnus Carlsen – Dmitry Jakovenko

Queen's Gambit [D31]

Nanking (10), 09.10.2009

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Be7

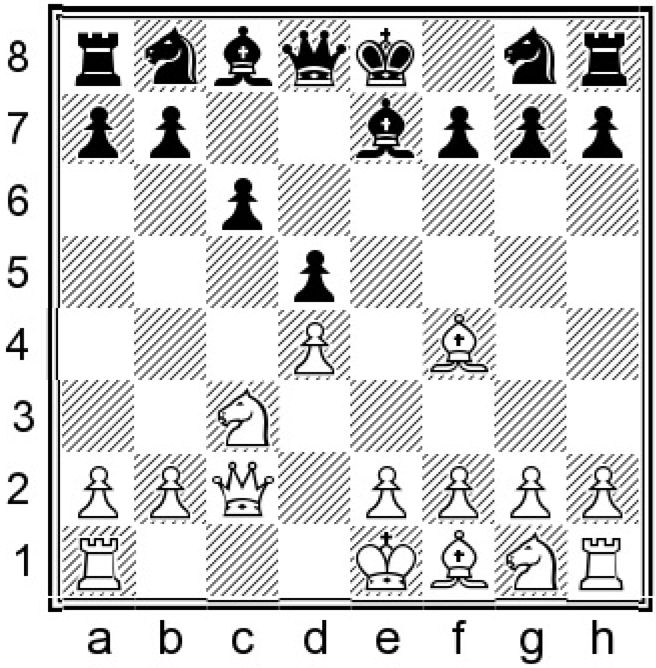
A well-known finesse to avoid the Carlsbad structure with cxd5 followed by Bg5, e3, Bd3 and Ne2. If White plays now 4.Nf3 Black answers 4...Nf6.

4.cxd5 exd5

In January 2009 Kasparov began to train Carlsen; the relationship was short but very profitable for Carlsen. This game was apparently an easy win, and Carlsen emulated his then chess mentor (and others before, especially Botvinnik), who handled this type of structure almost perfectly.

5.Bf4 c6 6.Qc2

This move, avoiding ...Bf5, was regarded as rather unambitious, in contrast with 6.e3 Bf5 7.g4, played, among others, by Botvinnik.

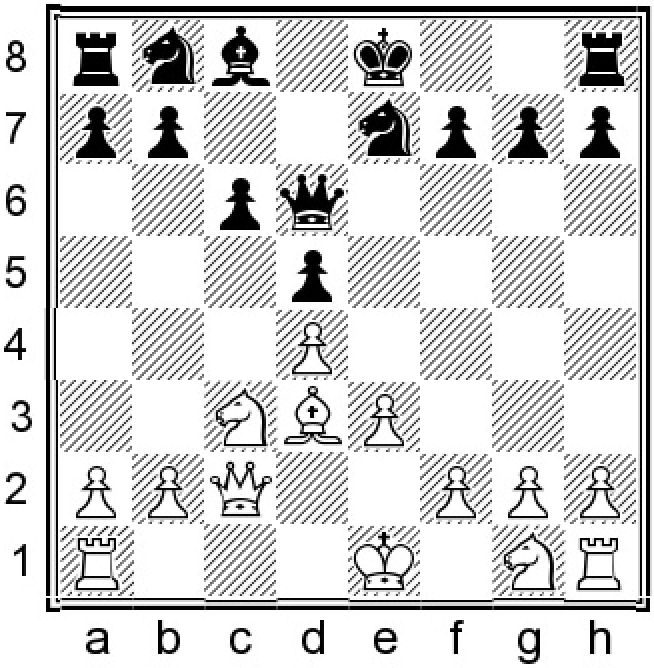


6...Bd6

In this pawn structure, exchanging the light-squared bishops is one of Black's typical plans to reduce White's pressure.

For a long time it was thought that the 6.Qc2 line was harmless, in view of 6...g6 7.e3 Bf5, but then this evaluation changed. The move that revitalised the line was 8.Qd2!, an idea of Petrosian's played in the 7th game of the Kasparov vs Karpov match from 1986. The tempo loss with Qc2–d2 will be recovered by attacking the f5-bishop. As Kasparov explains, Black's main problem is the development of his minor pieces, as the bishop on f5 and knight on f6 can be driven back after f3 and e4-e5 or g4.

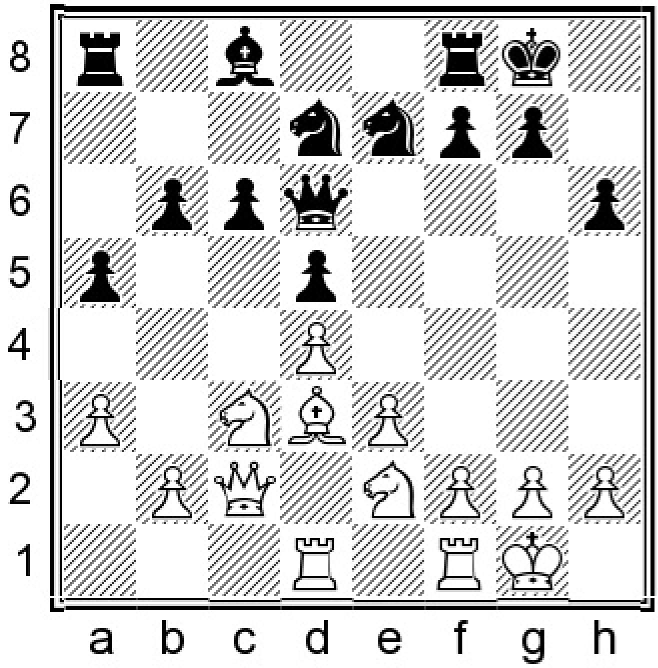
7.Bxd6 Qxd6 8.e3 Ne7 9.Bd3



9...b6

Black is always seeking to exchange his light-squared bishop for its annoying white counterpart on d3. This way of doing it weakens c6, but a later ...c5 by Black should not be ruled out.

This move was suggested by Kasparov in one of his books on his matches with Karpov. In Valencia, shortly before the text game, Karpov and Kasparov played two games with the same structure. In one of them Karpov tried 9...Nd7 instead, and there followed 10.Nge2 ("A flexible continuation typical of the given pawn structure, which enables White to carry out Botvinnik's classical plan with f3 and e4," according to Kasparov) 10...h6 (if 10...Nf6 White continues with his idea 11.f3! followed by e4) 11.0-0 0-0 12.a3 (Kasparov commented that "12.f3 was good, but for the moment I did not want to force events") 12...a5 (after 12...Nf6 the move 13.f3! would have gained in strength, since the counterblow ...c5 requires more preparation) 13.Rad1 b6?! (with the idea of answering 14.f3 with 14...Ba6).

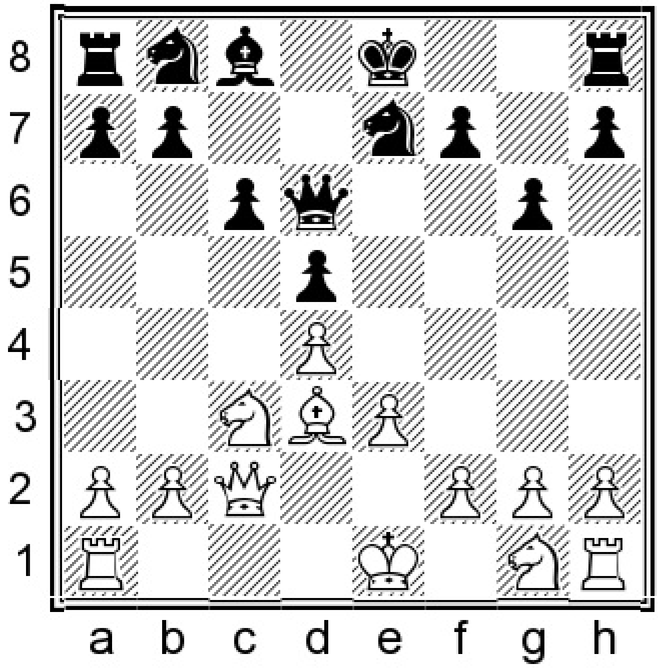


Exercise: What is the best move here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: 14.e4!, “the weakening of the pawn chain and the c6-square allows White to launch an immediate attack in the centre, exploiting the fact that Black is somewhat behind in development” (Kasparov), 14...dxe4 15.Nxe4 Qb8 16.N2c3 Ba6 17.Bxa6 Rxa6 18.d5!, and White’s initiative rapidly snowballs, Kasparov – Karpov, Valencia (rapid) 2009 m/2.

In a later game from the same 2009 match Karpov played 9...g6.

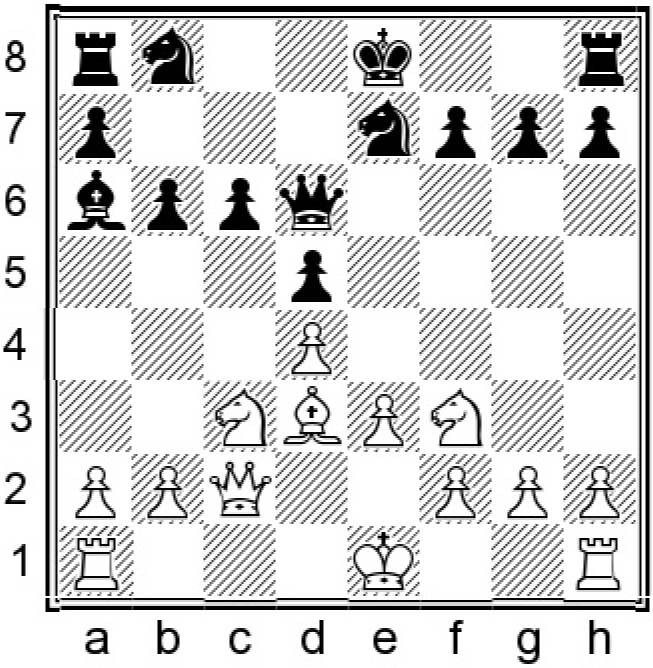


Exercise: How would you respond in that case?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The positional threat must be neutralized again. White's best answer is 10.f3! (10.Nge2 would allow 10...Bf5, whereas now 11.e4 is possible) 10...Nd7 11.Nge2 0-0 12.0-0 c5 "A typical defence against e4, but now Black's d5-pawn is chronically weak" (Kasparov) 13.Qd2 a6 14.Rad1 cxd4 (fixing the structure, but White's pieces will be better placed, while in case of 14...b5 instead, after 15.dxc5 it is wrong to play 15...Nxc5? due to 16.Be4!) 15.exd4 Nf6 16.g4, Kasparov – Karpov, Valencia (rapid) 2009 m/4. "White has a small but enduring advantage, which is what I was aiming for in this game" (Kasparov).

10.Nf3 Ba6



Exercise: And now, to take on a6 or not?

Show/Hide Solution

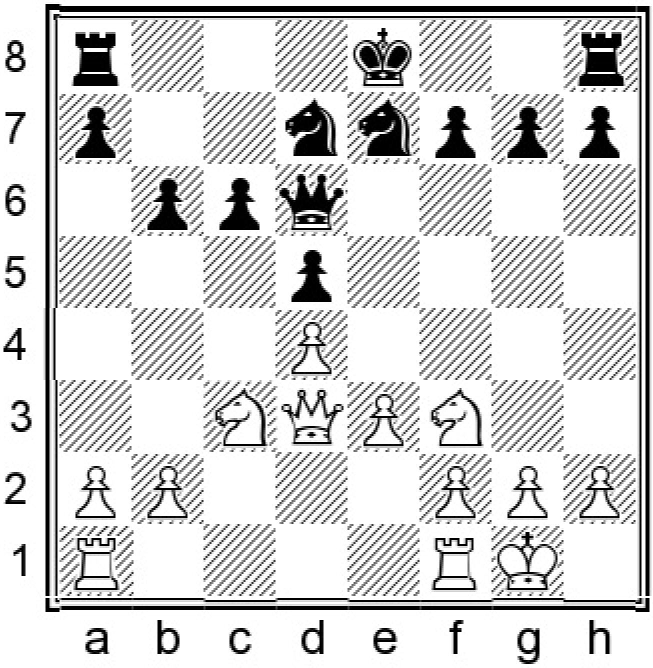
Answer:

11.0-0

Any exchange which misplaces an enemy piece is worth considering, so in this case White could consider 11.Bxa6, but is the temporary displacement of the knight on a6 actually beneficial to White here? Not in this case, as the knight can move to c7, defending d5, and maybe go to e6 later, putting pressure on d4 and supporting the pawn break ...c5, which is constantly up for consideration.

11...Bxd3 12.Qxd3 Nd7?!

As Carlsen will show, 12...0-0! was better. White can answer 13.e4, but the situation is unclear, and after 13...dxe4 14.Nxe4 Qd5 both sides have weaknesses.



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

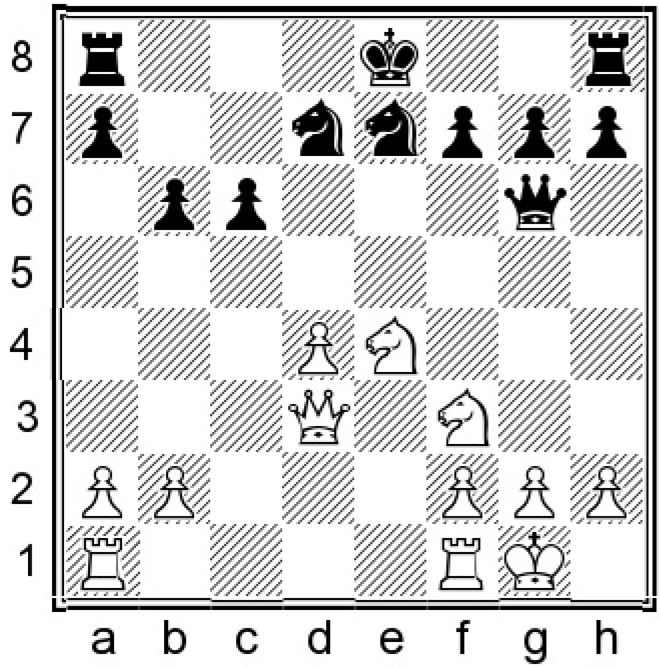
Answer:

13.e4!

This pawn break takes place at the most awkward moment for Black, and “punishes” Black for his last move thanks to a tactic.

13...0-0

Under normal conditions, the d4-pawn would be left weak, after for example 13...dxe4 14.Nxe4 Qg6 (or ...Qd5).



Exercise: This looks good, so why did Black reject this line?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because 15.Qa3! planning Nd6+ is very strong, since the black king is stuck in the centre, and 15...Qxe4? loses to 16.Rfe1.

14.e5

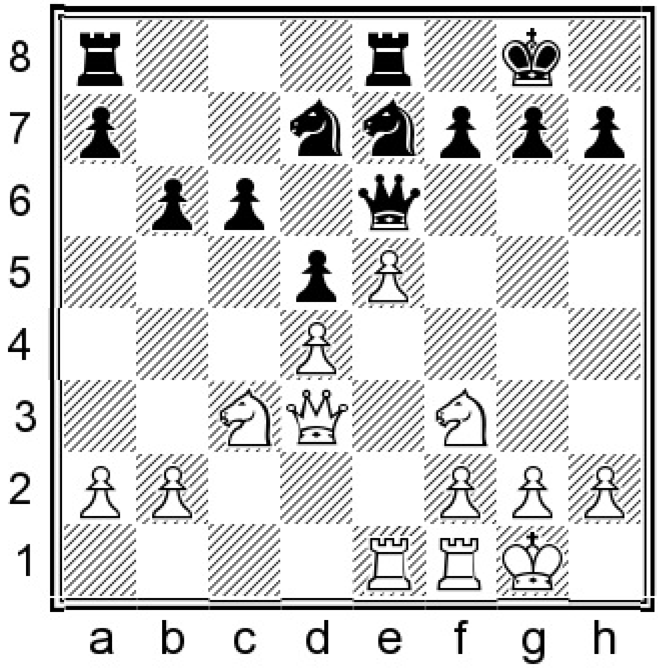
White gains space for free and with tempo.

14...Qe6 15.Rae1 Rfe8?!

The best arrangement of Black's rooks is not clear. This move is a bit passive, relying on the solidity of the black position.

Perhaps the idea was to improve the inactive d7-knight with 16...Nf8 and then ...Ne6, but White will demonstrate that there isn't enough time for that.

Since the "normal" course of events is not in his favour, perhaps it was time to alter the pawn structure, for example with 15...f6!?



Exercise: How does White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Nh4!

With his previous rook move White had already revealed his intentions, which are to exploit his pawn majority in the centre and kingside to launch an attack, based on f4-f5.

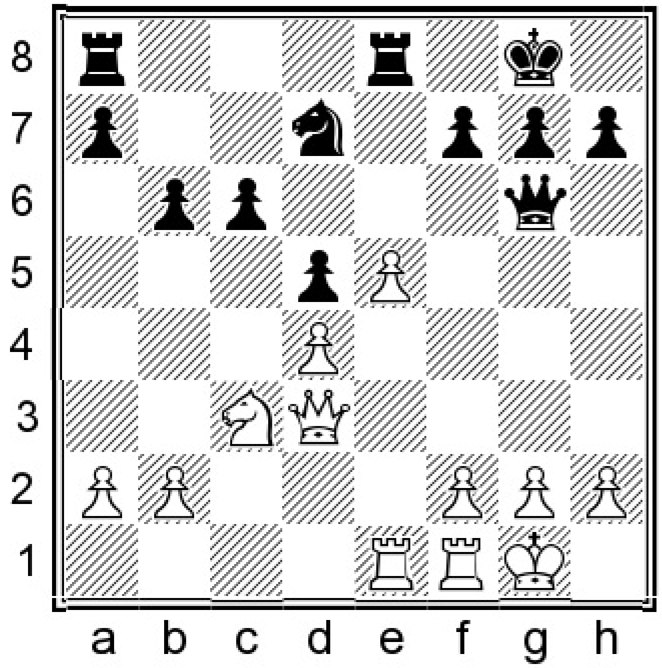
16...Ng6?!

The immediate 16...c5 could be answered by the nasty 17.Nb5, or even 17.f4 would also be considered. The e7-knight was performing a useful function supporting the d-pawn, and by moving it Black postpones the possibility of breaking with ...c5.

After abandoning the f-file it was very hard to play 16...f6, but this was probably the best option.

17.Nxg6 Qxg6

Other recaptures would be answered with 18.f4.



Exercise: What should he do now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.Qd2

Naturally, White avoids the exchange of queens. The plan is to play f4-f5 as we know.

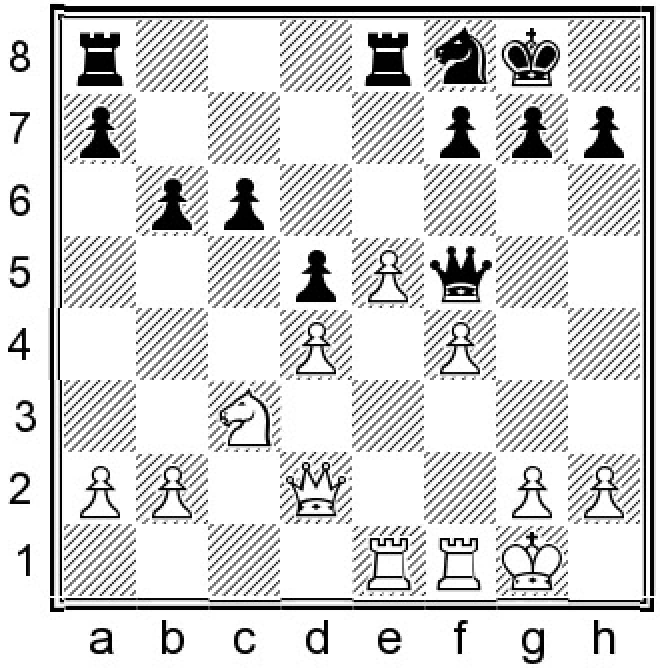
18...Nf8

18...f6 was not advisable because of 19.e6.

19.f4 Qf5?!

This move tries to prevent the advance f4-f5 by tactical means, but it merely delays the implementation of White’s plan.

It was essential to take more radical measures such as 19...f5, when White would have to choose a new plan, to prepare the pawn break g4 or play on the queenside with 20.b4, followed by Rc1.



Exercise: What do you think Carlsen chose here?

Show/Hide Solution

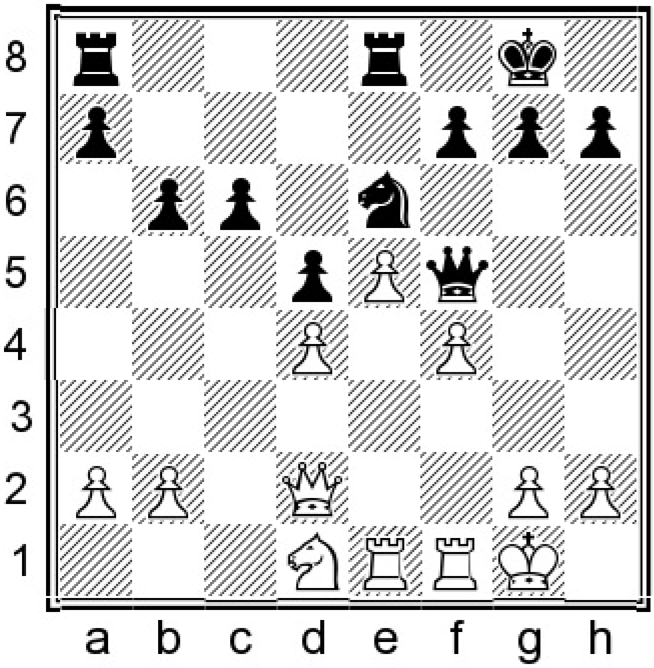
Answer:

20.Nd1!

The knight has nothing more to do on the queenside and will now join the fight on the other flank, with the queen as a target. 20.Ne2 with the same idea was also possible.

20...f6

Carlsen commented that Jakovenko was possibly intending to continue actively with 20...Ne6, basing his defence on the pressure on d4, but there is a way to demonstrate a flaw in this idea.

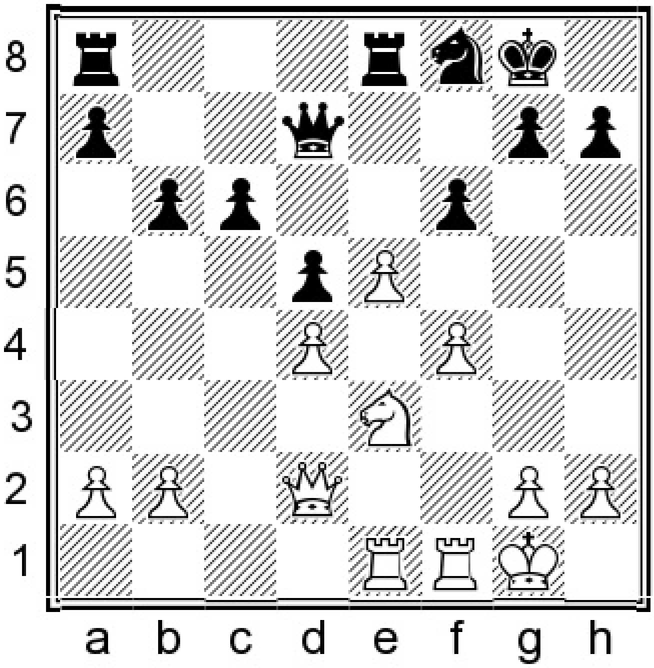


Exercise: What is it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: White would play 21.Ne3 Qe4 22.Nc2! Qf5 and now, after protecting the d4-pawn with 23.Rd1!, there is no good defence against the threat of 24.Ne3 and 25.f5.

21.Ne3 Qd7



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

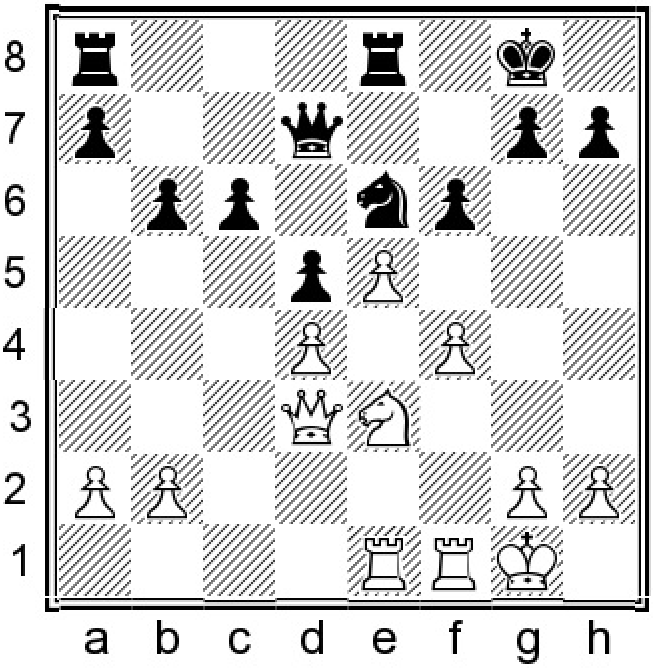
Answer:

22.Qd3!

After driving off the black queen, White continues to seize important squares; the threat is the awkward 23.Nf5.

22...fxe5

Exercise: After 22...Ne6, which is the best continuation?



Show/Hide Solution

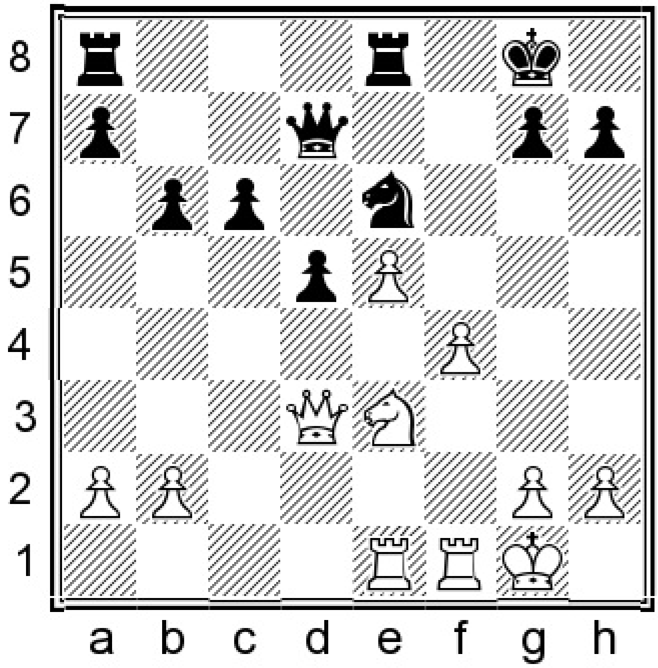
Answer: Black can't defend all his weaknesses after 23.exf6! (better than 23.f5?! Ng5) 23...gxf6 24.Ng4! followed by 25.Qf5 (e.g. if 24...Qg7) or 25.Qg3, and Black's position is almost untenable.

23.dxe5

Better than 23.fxe5, which also gives White a slight advantage, but then 23...Ne6 is stronger than in the game.

With 23.dxe5 White hasn't ruled out the idea of playing Nf5-d6, and he also creates a mobile pawn majority which could overwhelm Black on the kingside.

23...Ne6



Exercise: What should he play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

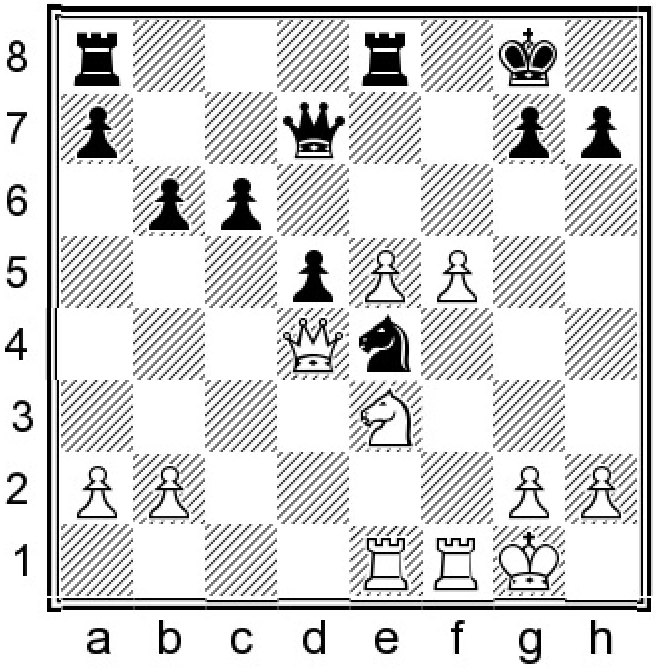
24.f5!

The pawns begin to roll forward; in contrast, after 24.Nf5?! Nc5 25.Qc2 (or 25.Qh3 Rad8) 25...Ne4 Black has noticeably improved his position, and there are no serious threats.

24...Nc5 25.Qd4!

This central square is ideal, and Black now needs to worry about both 26.e6 and 26.f6.

25...Ne4



Exercise: The knight reaches a good position, but “not all that glitters is gold”: how to prove it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Nxd5!

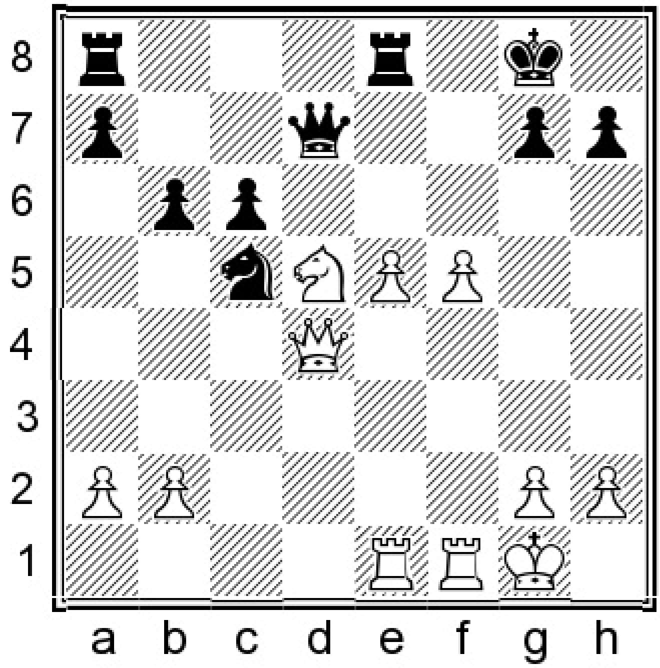
The a8-rook allows this combination, but it is not as simple as it looks.

White’s position is so good that both 26.e6 and 26.f6 were also strong.

26...Qxd5

26...cxd5 allows 27.Rxe4.

The most tenacious move was 26...Nc5, which doesn’t solve Black’s problems but forces White to find a refutation.



Exercise: What would be White's best response to 26...Nc5?

Show/Hide Solution

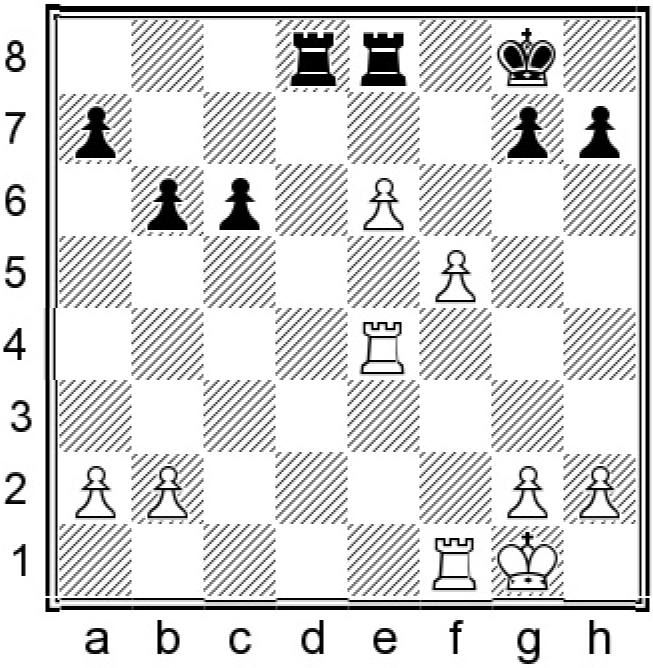
Answer: The strongest move is 27.f6!, threatening to win with 28.f7+, and after 27...Red8 there are several continuations, the most promising being 28.f7+ Kf8 29.Qh4 Qxd5 30.e6! (a beautiful sacrifice to open lines for the white rooks and prevent a blockade with ...Ne6) 30...Nxe6 31.Qxh7, and despite Black's temporary advantage in material, the tenacious engines in 2009 could find no defence for him, and in 2020 they can't find one either.

The black pieces are paralysed in this line. One idea for White is to prevent ...Qd4 with check, to be able to play Qxg7 without exchanging queens. White can therefore continue with 32.Kh1 or 32.Rf2, threatening among other things 33.Qg8+ and Qxg7.

27.Qxe4

Carlsen has an extra pawn and will demonstrate good technique in making it decisive.

27...Rad8 28.e6 Qxe4 29.Rxe4



29...Rd6?!

This fails to complicate White's task. Black could have created more difficulties with 29...Rd2, when White's 'problem' is that he has several attractive continuations, and it's not easy to decide which is the strongest. The best might be 30.b4 Rxa2 31.Rc1 and an alternative would be 30.g4 Rxb2 after which White must choose between 31.g5 and the better looking 31.Rd1!, followed by 32.Rd7 or 32.Red4 and Rd8.

30.g4

Now, with a material advantage, White just needs to worry about finding the correct way to advance his pawns.

30...Kf8 31.g5 Ke7 32.Kg2

Not hurrying. 32.f6+ was also good.

32...Rd5

Black can't hold up the advance with 32...Rf8 since White plays it anyway: 33.f6+! gxf6 34.gxf6+ and 34...Rxf6 loses to 35.Rxf6 Kxf6 36.e7.

33.Kg3 Kd6 34.h4 c5 35.f6! gxf6 36.gxf6 Rd3+ 37.Kh2 Rd2+ 38.Kh1

1–0

Carlsen played the Carlsbad structure; it has a quiet appearance, but after the wrong move order by Black White got a small advantage.

After a more serious mistake, in the 19th move, the advantage was bigger. White captured a central pawn later, and won the game thanks to the overwhelming advance of his central pawns.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It is useful to refine the move order in the opening, so as to avoid lines one considers unpleasant. (3...Be7!)

2.) The move order, even in the opening, is rarely a trivial matter. (12...Nd7? *12...0-0!*)

3.) “What is my opponent threatening or planning?” is a question which you should ask yourself before determining your own plan. (15...Rfe8? *15...f6! 19...f5!*)

4.) It is important to offer maximum resistance, even when objectively the position is losing, as in practical play winning positions are not always won! (26...Qxd5? *26...*N*c5! 29...*R*d2!*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 6

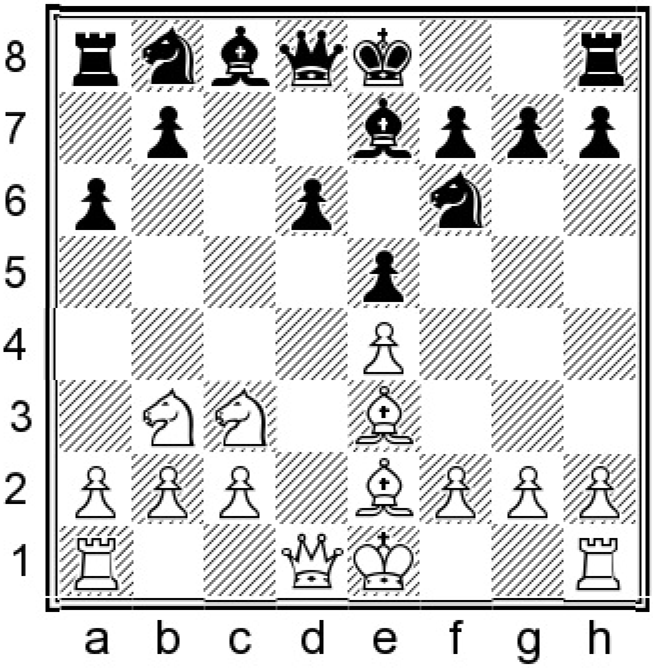
Magnus Carlsen – Hikaru Nakamura

Sicilian Defence [B92]

Wijk aan Zee (8), 23.01.2011

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Be2 e5 7.Nb3 Be7 8.Be3

8.0-0 is the most usual move, and amazingly this small change in the move order had a great importance in the course of the game.



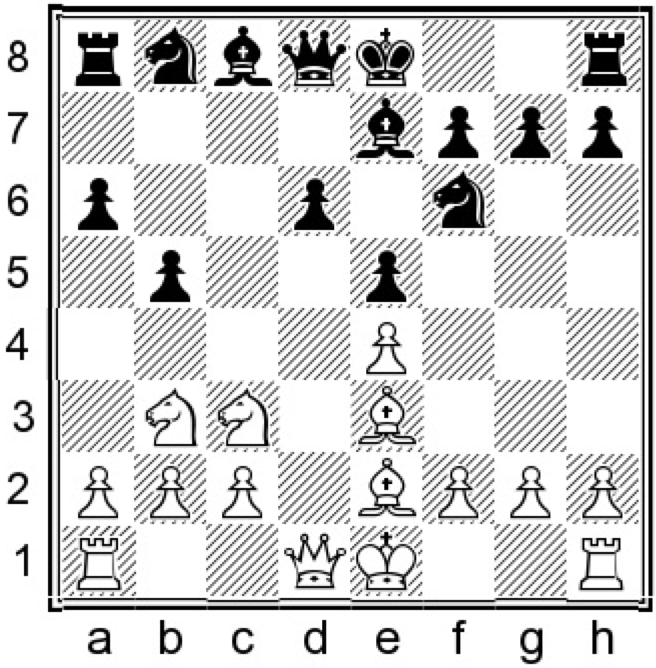
Now there are several standard moves for Black, with no great difference between them.

8...0-0

The most flexible choice we could say, but the destination of the king has special rules.

The phrase “Castle only when you don’t see a better move” is attributed to Reti. To castle at the right time we hence must rightly answer the logical question is there a better one? Why?

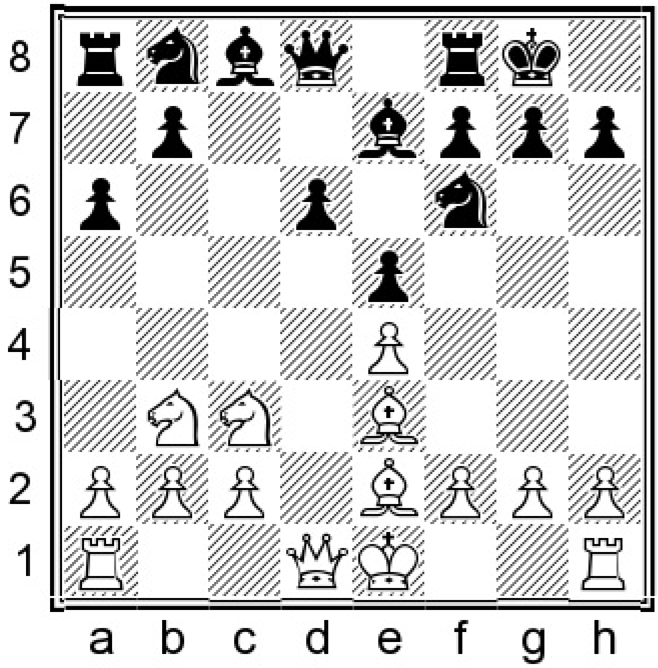
Exercise: Let’s see first that 8...b5 is premature. Why?



Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because of the typical reply 9.a4!, and after 9...b4 10.Nd5 Black is in trouble: 11.Bb6 is threatened. Now the bright side of 8.Be3 is seen.

As we shall see the most accurate move was 8...Be6!



Exercise: How did White reply to 8...0-0?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

9.g4!

The game will most probably involve mutual attacks against kings castled on opposite sides, and White is the first to begin. Actually, this line is not new; it was played several times back in the 1980s.

Going back, after 8...Be6! the advance 9.g4 is not so good because of the counterpunch 9...d5!, with good play after 10.g5 d4 or after 10.exd5 Nxd5 11.Nxd5 Bxd5 12.0-0 Nc6 or 12...0-0, as played several times.

Going back one move more, in the case of 8.g4, as Black has not castled, a good answer is 8...h6!

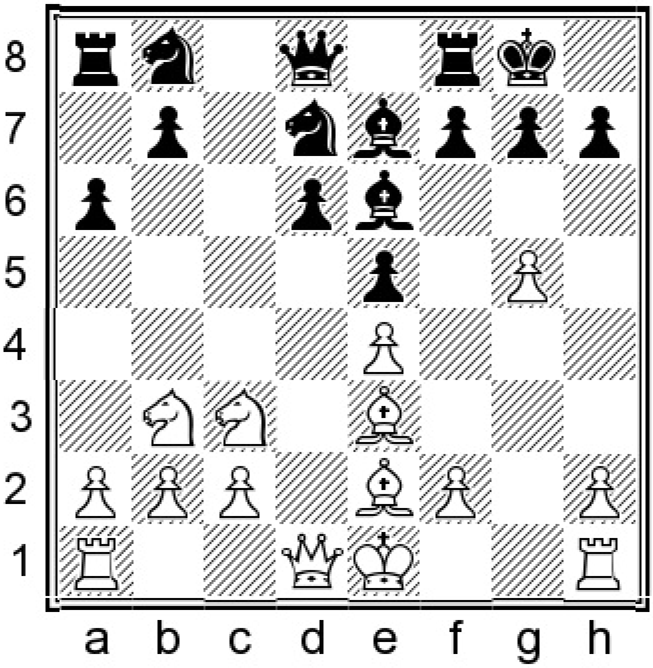
9...Be6

Nakamura began to think a lot, yet it is hard to imagine he was not familiar with the move order chosen by Carlsen. Most probably, he was regretting having castled automatically, and he was now trying to figure out how to avoid more damage to his position.

Of course, after castling 9...h6 is not good because of 10.h4!

10.g5 Nfd7

Retiring to e8 is generally not good, and this case is no exception. After 10...Ne8 White can progress with natural moves, e.g. 11.Qd2 Nd7 12.f4 g6 13.0-0-0 Ng7 14.h4.



Exercise: What should he play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

11.h4!

Defending the g5-pawn in this way is slightly more elastic that with 11.Qd2, and White’s plan includes open files with h5 and g6.

11...Nb6

Here and several times in this game ...Nc6 is interesting. After 11...Nc6 12.Qd2 Black counterattacks with 12...a5 13.a4 Nb4, reaching a satisfactory position.

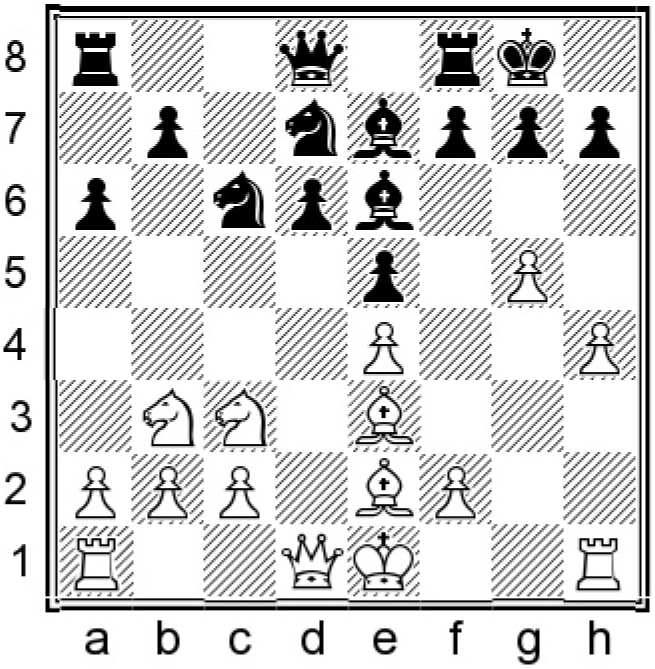
Let’s compare it with the standard position of the Boleslavsky Variation:

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 Nc6 6.Be2 e5 7.Nb3 Be7 8.Be3 0-0 9.0-0 Be6 10.f4 a5 11.a4 Nb4.

The difference with this position is that in our game White is far more advanced on the kingside, but White’s king has no safe place to go, and Black can counterattack with ...f5 or ...f6.

Question: So, that alternative was good for Black, right?

Position after 11...Nc6:



Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Not completely clear, and what the engines prefer is not always the best choice at the board with limited time to analyse, because tactical complications don't frighten the engines, whereas for a master they are maybe too complicated to handle during the game.

After 11...Nc6, instead of 12.Qd2 White would probably reply 12.Nd5, occupying d5 in good conditions.

12.Qd2

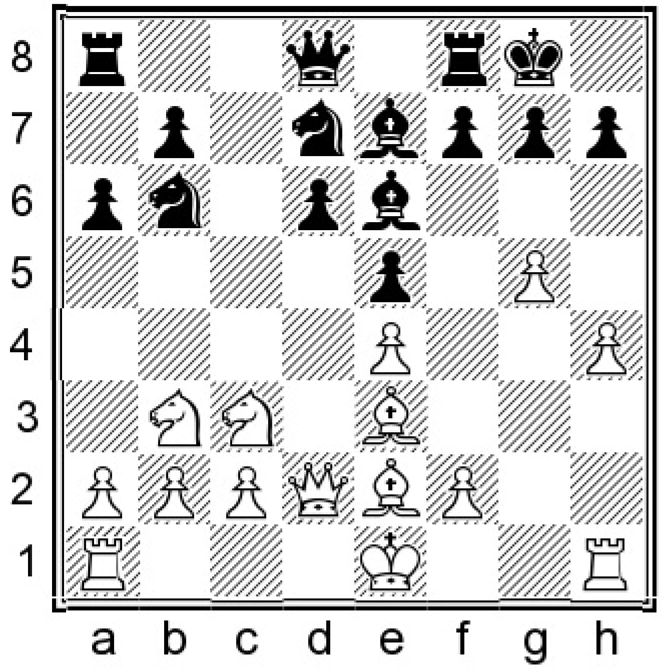
At the press conference after the game Carlsen said he briefly considered 12.f4 exf4 13.Bxf4 but he thought 13...d5 (better than 13...Nc6 14.Nd5!) was satisfactory for Black.

12.Qd2

12...N8d7

12...a5 is another option, where 13.f4 a4 14.f5 Nc4 15.Bxc4 Bxc4 16.Nc1 Nc6 leads to an unclear position: White prevents the...d5 break, but only after fully coordinating his forces can we begin to talk about a white advantage, while White's king in the center encourages an eventual...d5, maybe after preparatory moves like ...Re8 and/or ...Rc8.

Meanwhile, 12...a5 13.a4 Nc6 transposes to the line that we mentioned in the notes to move 11.



13.f4

Question: As 13...d5 is not on the table, this move has more justification than before, but it allows Black's knight to occupy e5. Isn't it more flexible to first play 13.0-0-0?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There are three moves to consider, 13.h5 is premature due to 13...a5!, and answering your question, Carlsen didn't want to play 13.0-0-0 because of 13...a5.

Even without having the position analysed at home, Carlsen considered the ...a5 plan correct for Black on several occasions.

After 13.f4 Black can take on f4 and put a knight on e5, although White also gets d4 for his passive b3-knight.

13...exf4 14.Bxf4 Ne5

Now White must consider the knight jump to c4 on every move.

15.0-0-0 Rc8

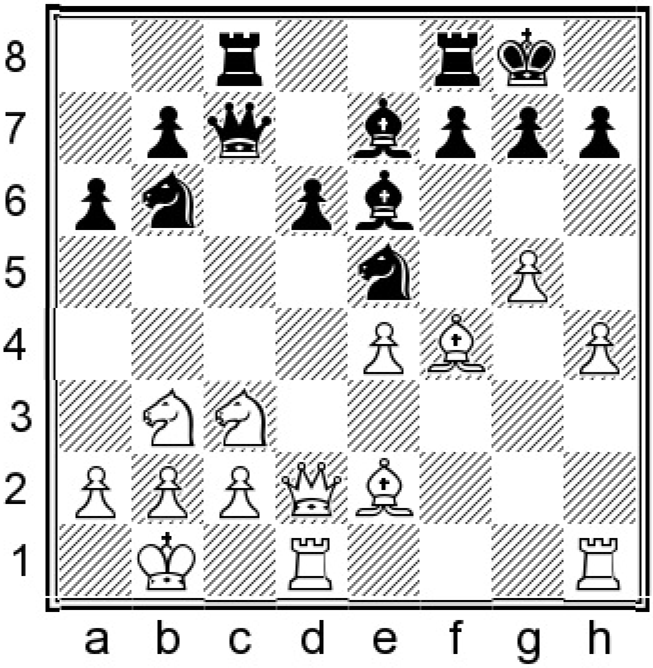
After 15...Nbc4 White can play 16.Bxc4 Nxc4 17.Qd3, with ideas like Nd4–f5 and Nd5, or 17.Qg2, with the added idea of playing h5.

16.Qe1 is also interesting, keeping Bxc4 in reserve for the best opportunity. The move Nd5 is always possible and Qg3 followed by h5 as well.

16.Kb1 Qc7

Nakamura continues with preparing ...Nc4.

If 16...Nbc4, then instead of taking the knight White can play 17.Qe1 as before, but he can also reply 17.Qc1, trying to neutralize Black's pressure on the c-file. White could continue later with Nd4 or Nd5 and against 17...Qc7 it is possible to play 18.Nd5! in good conditions, with c2 better defended.



Exercise: What did Carlsen play next?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.h5!

Carlsen steps away from all preparatory moves and choses the most straightforward move.

17.Nd4 bringing the inactive b3-knight to the battle is logical, but 17...Nbc4 18.Bxc4 Nxc4 19.Qd3 Qb6! forces the knight to return to b3 or else White plays 20.b3. In Arizmendi vs Ferrer, Torrevieja 1997, with so many pieces gathered on the queenside White was caught in one of the tactical motifs of the position, playing 20.Bc1?, which was followed by 20...Na3+ 21.Ka1 Qxd4!, although he finally got a draw.

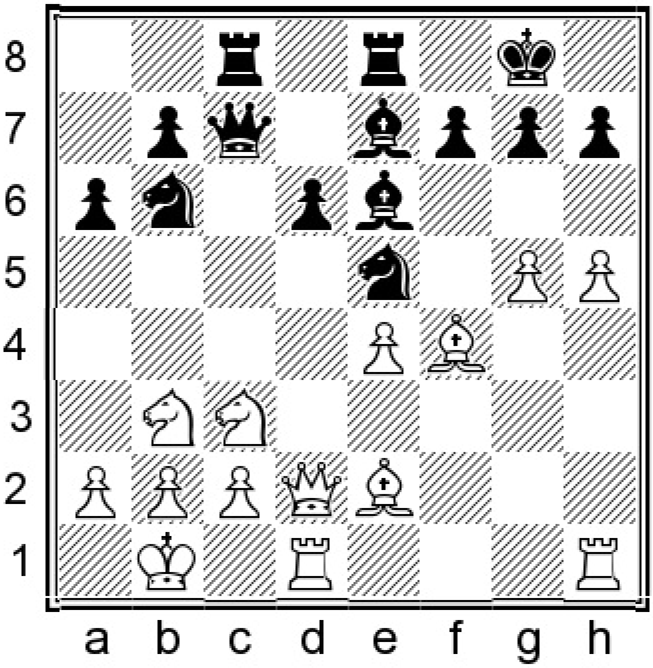
17...Rfe8?!

Black, on the other hand, makes a preparatory move once more; it appears useful, but is inaccurate.

This was possibly the right moment to play 17...Nbc4!, when 18.Qc1? fails to 18...Nxb2!.

Black's chances seem no worse after 18.Qd4 Na3+ 19.Kc1 b5, while after 18.Bxc4 Nxc4 19.Qd3 Na3+! 20.Kc1 Black has 20...Qc4 and the position is unclear.

It will become clear pretty soon that White can launch an attack much more easily in the game than in these lines.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue his attack?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

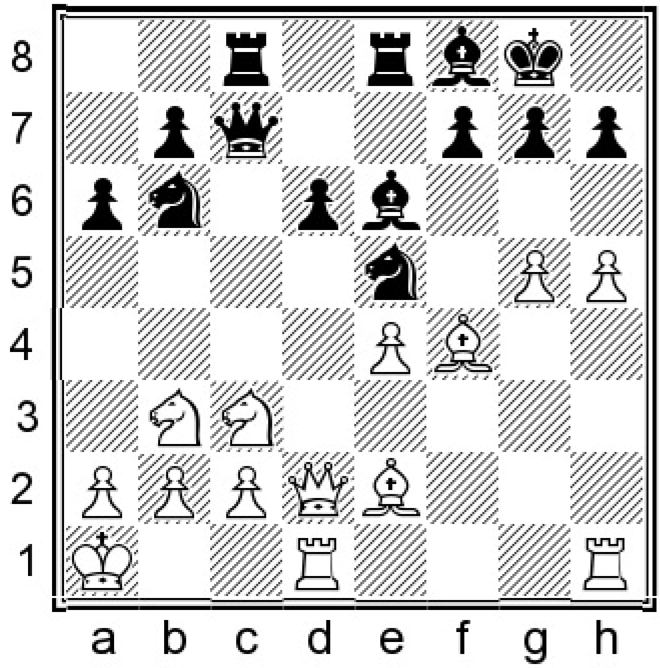
18.Ka1!

Precisely combining attack and defence, White prevents future combinations based on ...Nc4 and ...Na3+.

Let's look at concrete lines: after 18.Nd4 there may follow 18...Nbc4 19.Bxc4 Nxc4 20.Qd3, and now 20...b5?! fails to 21.Nd5!, so Black would play 20...Qc5, intending ...b5 or ...Qb4. If 19.Qe1 then 19...Qb6, and 20.Bc1?? is wrong again because of 20...Na3+ 21.Ka1 Nc6!, winning, and this is even better than 21...Qxd4.

18...Bf8?!

Once again 18...Nbc4 was preferable, although after 19.Bxc4 Nxc4 20.Qd3 Na3 21.Rh2, or 20...b5 21.Nd5, Black has fewer resources than after 17...Nbc4!.



Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.Nd4

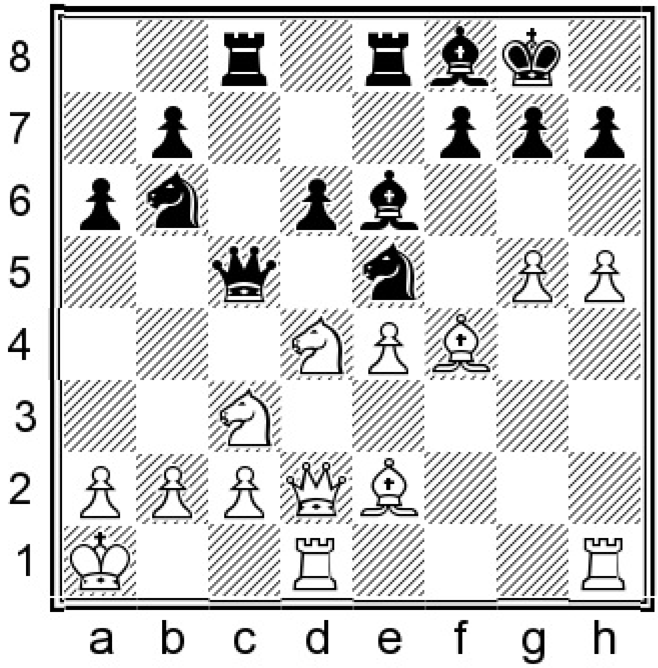
The beginning of the end. White succeeds in placing his pieces in ideal positions at the best moment, and then everything will be ready to open lines against the enemy monarch.

19...Qc5?!

“In the middlegame his moves were all pretty natural, but 19...Qc5 was probably one preparatory move too many,” was Carlsen’s comment.

If 19...Nec4 20.Bxc4 Nxc4 21.Qd3 Qb6 22.Bc1 White has his king’s position safely defended and can continue with his attack.

After the game Nakamura suggested 19...g6, to prepare ...Bg7, but there are several advantageous continuations for White after 20.hxg6 hxg6 (or 20...fxg6 21.Bxe5 dxe5 22.Nxe6 Rxe6 23.Nd5!, winning). The most direct way is 21.Bxe5 dxe5 22.Nxe6 Rxe6 (if 22...fxe6 then 23.Qe3 follows and the weaknesses and open lines on the kingside are decisive: there would follow Qh3 and then Rdf1, Bg4, etc.) 23.Bg4 Rd6 24.Qh2 Rxd1+ 25.Nxd1, winning.



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.g6!

This is a typical sacrifice to open lines against the opponent's king. Now "Black is fighting an uphill battle" (Carlsen).

20...Nec4

Opening lines in our king's position is almost never a good defence, and not here either. After 20...fxg6 21.hxg6 h6 (or 21...Nxg6 22.Nxe6 Rxe6 23.Bg4 Nxf4 24.Qxf4 Rf6 25.Qh2, etc.) 22.Nxe6 Rxe6 23.Bxe5, with so many open lines there is no resistance after 23...Rxe5 (or 23...dxe5 24.Bg4 Rd6 25.Bxc8 Rxd2 26.Be6+ Kh8 27.Rxd2, and mate is only a matter of time) 24.Qf4 Qc7 25.Bg4 Rb8 26.Rdf1, etc.

Not even the tenacious engines can resist the attacks in these lines.

21.Bxc4 Nxc4 22.Qd3

The queen doesn't move to the kingside yet. It is necessary to keep an eye on the queenside, as ...Nxb2 could follow.

Carlsen evaluated Black's position as untenable. His attack is for free and Black has no counterplay, indeed, Nakamura could not offer resistance.

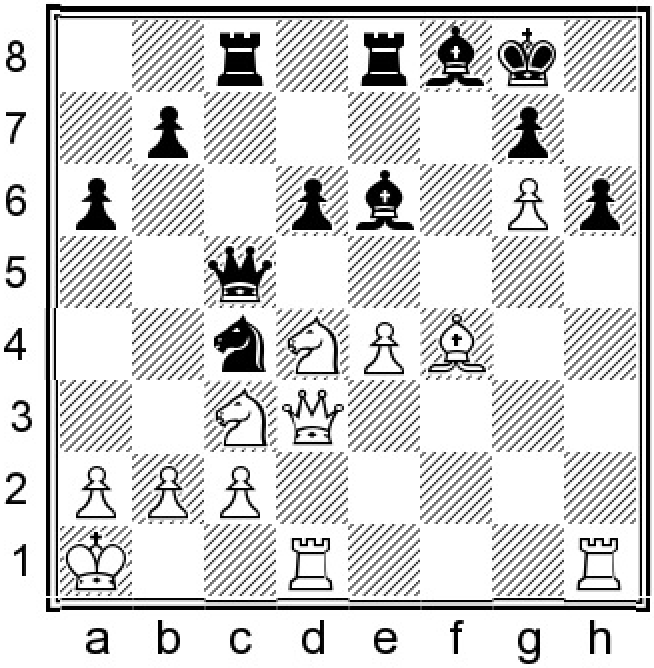
22...fxg6

The engines prefer 22...h6, although after 23.gxf7+ Bxf7 24.Qg3 Kh8 25.Rhg1 Black's king security is questionable.

23.hxg6

Naturally, the engines also like 23.Nxe6 Rxe6 24.Qh3 with a strong offensive. This and the line played are of similar strength, but there is nothing more "human" than opening lines against the enemy king immediately.

23...h6



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue the attack?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24.Qg3

There are more good continuations, but Carlsen was very pleased with this move, which plans moves likes Rxh6 and after ...gxh6 he can reply g7 with a winning attack.

24...Qb6

After 24...Qb4 25.Bc1 Ne5 26.Nd5 Bxd5 27.exd5, followed by Ne6, or Bf4 and Bxe5, White's winning attack is easy to play.

24...Nxb2 doesn't work for several reasons. One of them is 25.Kxb2 Qb4+ 26.Nb3, planning Rd4, and there is nothing for the piece after 26...d5 27.exd5 Qa3+ 28.Kb1, etc.

25.Bc1 Qa5

Trying to hurt White's castled position. It will not work, but 25...Ne5 26.Nd5 Bxd5 27.exd5 is similar to what we have already seen.

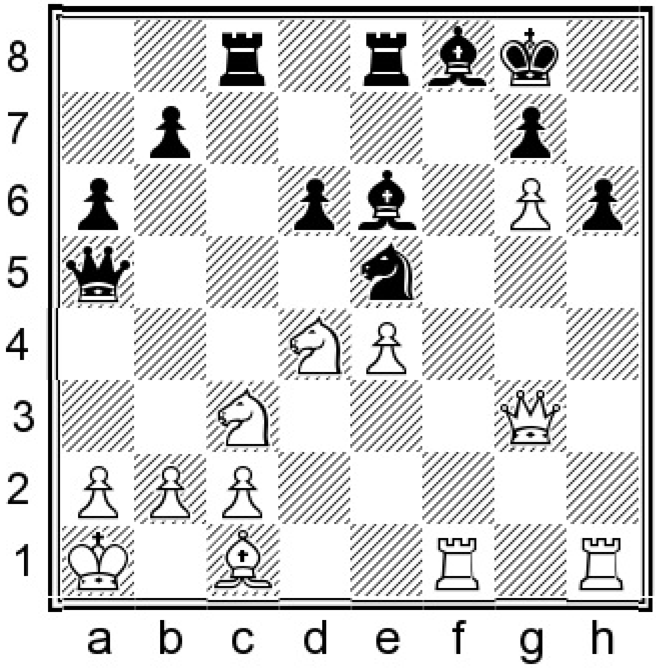
26.Rdf1

Carlsen chooses to increase the pressure, putting aside the also strong continuation 26.Nxe6 Rxe6 27.Nd5, followed by the occupation of the f-file, and now 27...Rxe4? fails to 28.Qf3, attacking the rook and threatening 29.Qf7+ and Rxh6+.

26...Ne5

Still trying to get counterchances with the exchange sacrifice on c3.

The engines try to resist with the centralisation 26...Qe5, but White's advantage is winning after 27.Qf2, for example 27...Qc5 (after 27...Rc7 White plays one of his main threats 28.Nxe6 Qxe6 29.Nd5, and tactical themes arise, 29...Rd7 30.Bxh6!, etc.) 28.Rfg1! planning Bxh6 and g7.



Exercise: White has several attractive continuations again, what was Carlsen's choice?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.Nd5!

“Showtime!” (Kavalek). White begins his final attack with material sacrifices.

Avoiding 27...Rxc3! which would be the reply to 27.Bxh6? among other moves.

The line 27.Nxe6 Rxe6 28.Nd5 Rxg6 29.Qb3 Kh8 30.Nf4 Rf6 31.Ne6 was also effective, but as White already had a direct way to continue the attack, exchanging on e6 first with no clear reason is only a computer choice.

27...Bxd5

After 27...Rc4 trying to divert the attack, Kavalek in *The Huffington Post* showed the following variation: 28.Rxh6!, and mate in 10 moves according to the engines, 28...gxh6 29.Rxf8+! Rxf8 (or 29...Kxf8 30.Bxh6+ Kg8 31.Nf6+ Kh8 32.g7#) 30.Ne7+ Kg7 (if 30...Kh8 then 31.g7+ Kh7 32.Nxe6, etc.) 31.Bxh6+! Kxh6 (31...Kh8 gets mate: 32.g7+ Kh7 33.gxf8=N+ Kxh6 34.Nef5+ Bxf5 35.Nxf5+ Kh5 36.Qh4#) 32.Qh4+ Kg7 33.Nxe6#.

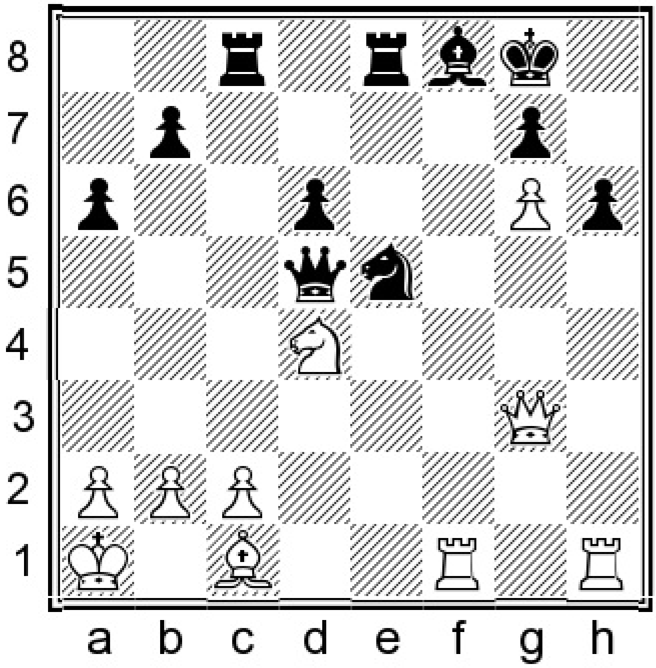
28.exd5

The open files on the kingside allow sacrifices on h6 and also the knight jump to f5, giving more strength to the blow on h6.

28...Qxd5

Removing the protection of the e6 square and trying to reinforce the defence, but it is too late.

After 28...Qa4 White can simply play 29.c3, but the most forceful line is 29.Bxh6! gxh6 30.g7 Bxg7 31.Rf4!, followed by Nf5, with an unstoppable attack, but not the hurried 31.Nf5? due to 31...Qg4!.



Exercise: What is the strongest move now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.Bxh6!

After what we saw this combination is "as natural as a baby's smile" (as Reuben Fine would have said).

29...gxh6

If 29...Qxd4 then 30.Be3 is winning, threatening the queen and also 31.Rh8+!.

30.g7 Be7

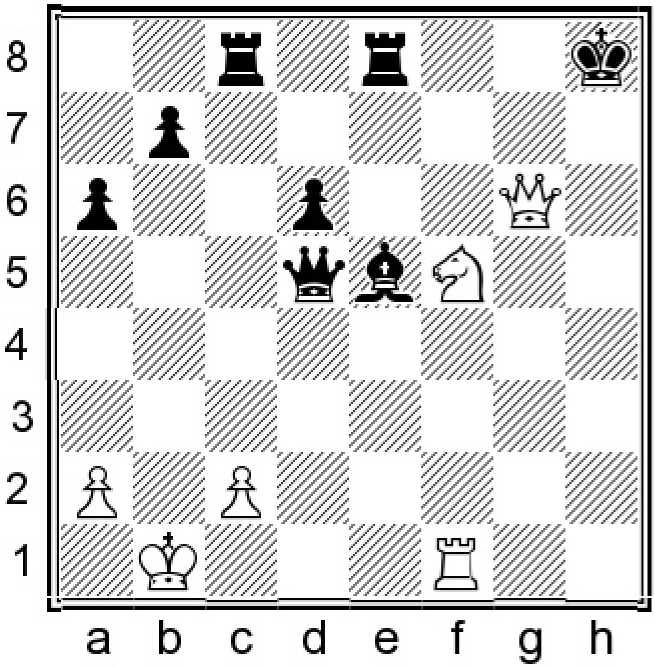
30...Bxg7 loses to 31.Nf5 Rc7 32.Nxh6+ Kh7 33.Ng4+ Kg8 (or 33...Qxh1 34.Nf6+!) 34.Nf6+.

Carlsen played the remaining moves almost without thinking.

31.Rxh6 Nf7 32.Qg6!

A funny thing: the line 32.Rh8+ Nxh8 33.gxh8=Q+ Kxh8 was considered insufficient because h1 is covered.

Nonetheless the engines very quickly see that the forced sequence 34.Nf5 Bf6 35.Qg6 Bxb2+ 36.Kb1 Be5 is not a defence.



Exercise: Can you spot the winning move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The amazing 37.a4!!, controlling b5, is lethal (37.Qh6+ Kg8 38.a4 also works), planning 38.Rg1 and Black is surprisingly defenceless, but... this level of calculation is only suitable for computers: 37...Re6 38.Qh5+ Kg8 39.Qg5+ Kh8 40.Rg1, etc.

Let’s go back to the end of our game.

32...Nxh6 33.Qxh6 Bf6 34.Qh8+ Kf7 35.g8=Q+ Rxg8 36.Qxf6+ Ke8 37.Re1+

1–0

Carlsen confused his opponent with an unexpected move order in the opening. It was no more dangerous than normal lines, but it took Nakamura unawares. He consumed too much time and committed several inaccuracies. Carlsen was the first to begin the attack against his opponent’s king and ended the game brilliantly.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) The move order in the opening is almost never irrelevant. (*8...Be6!*)

2.) “You have to give squares to get squares” (Najdorf). (13.f4!)

3.) When the kings are castled on opposite flanks, the most usual scenario is a race to be the first to attack the enemy king. Speed is crucial. (17.h5! 17...Rfe8? *17...Nbc4!* 20.g6! 29.Bxh6!)

4.) A prophylactic move anticipating the opponent’s attacking idea is sometimes necessary. (18.Ka1!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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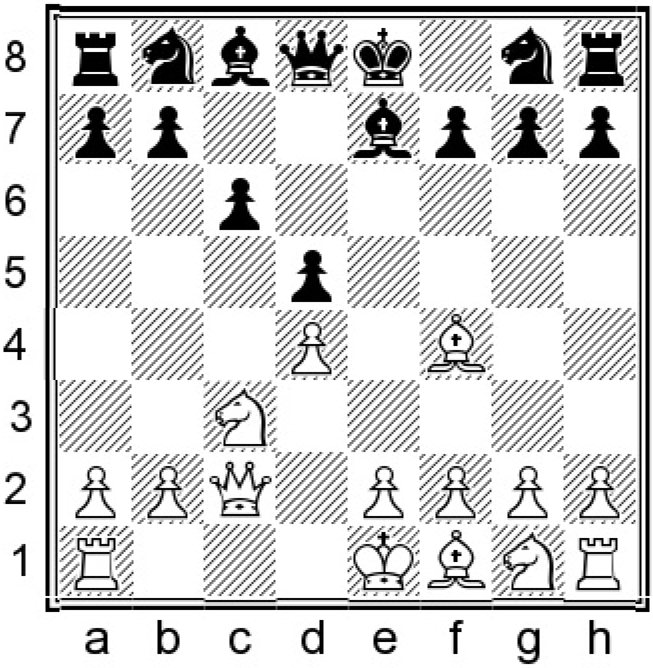
Game 7
Magnus Carlsen – Levon Aronian
Queen's Gambit [D31]
Wijk aan Zee (3), 16.01.2012

1.c4 e6 2.Nc3 d5 3.d4 Be7 4.cxd5 exd5 5.Bf4 c6 6.Qc2



6...Nf6

We saw 6...Bd6 in Game 5 and there we mentioned 6...g6, which helps us to understand this game a little better.

Carlsen has also faced the idea 6...Bg4, trying to exchange the light-squared bishops. He had to allow the bishop to move to h5 and g6 after 7.e3 Bh5 8.Bd3 Bg6 in Carlsen – Nakamura, Medias 2011, but as compensation he damaged his opponent's pawn structure, and created a point of contact on h5. There followed 9.Bxg6! hxg6 10.0-0-0 Nf6 11.f3!, with the typical idea of playing e4, then 11...Nbd7 12.Nge2 b5 13.e4 b4 14.Na4 dxe4 15.fxe4 Qa5 16.Kb1 0-0 17.h4! with a complicated game, which he finally won.

7.h3

Providing a safe retreat to the f4-bishop. Carlsen didn't want to test Aronian's revolutionary idea after 7.e3, when Black played the original manoeuvre 7...Nh5! 8.Be5 Nd7, exchanging the dark-squared bishop, after 9.Be2 Nxe5 10.dxe5 g6 11.Bxh5 gxh5 12.0-0-0 f6! in Grischuk – Aronian, Kazan 2011. Black got active play at the cost of weakening his pawn structure, and the idea is still valid.

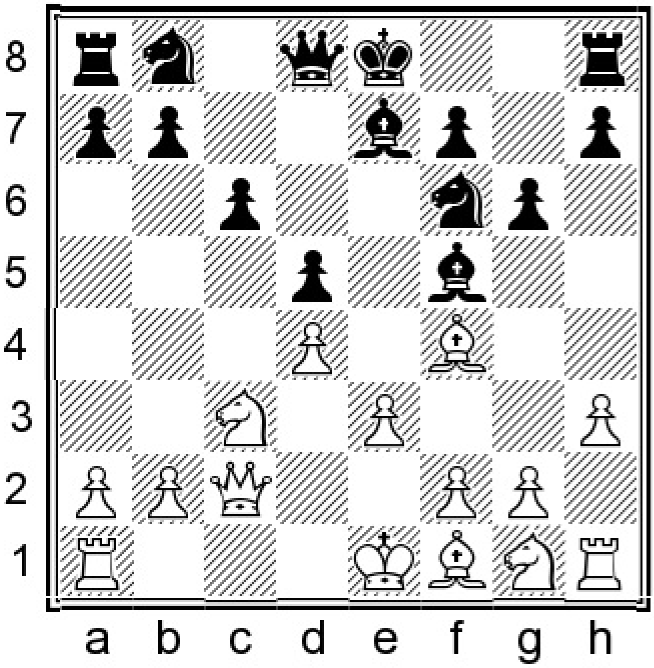
7...g6

Played before White plays e3 and Bd3. Aronian looks for a generally favourable exchange of the light-squared bishops, trying to take advantage of the tempo "lost" with 7.h3.

Whether h3 is a tempo lost or a useful one we shall see shortly.

7...0-0 8.e3 leads to typical positions of the Carlsbad structure after e.g. 8...Nbd7 9.Nf3 Re8 10.Bd3 Nf8 11.0-0 Ne6 12.Bh2 g6 13.Rab1.

8.e3 Bf5



Exercise (simple): And now what? Show what you learned from Game 5.

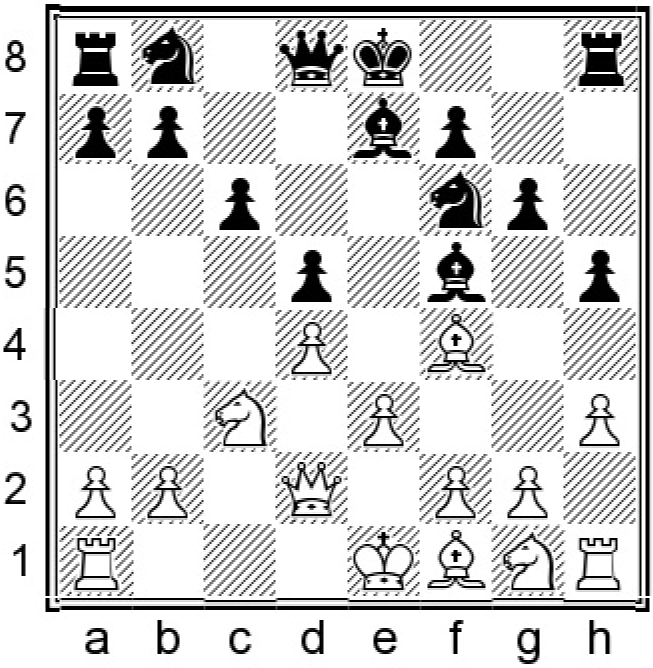
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

9.Qd2!

Petrosian's idea! This position is slightly different from that after 6...g6 7.e3 Bf5 8.Qd2! as we saw in Game 5 in the Karpov vs Kasparov games in the eighties. White refuses to exchange bishops here with 9.Bd3?, and tries to expel the f5-bishop with g4.

9...h5



Black denies a future g4, but pays a price. His pawn formation is weakened, and White's task will be to prove this is important.

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10.Bd3!

Question: Why does he now choose to exchange bishops?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Now the situation is different. White is trying to prove that the exchange of bishops is good for him here because of 9...h5, so he exchanges what he now considers a good defender.

10...Bxd3 11.Qxd3 Nbd7

After 11...Bd6 White may answer 12.Nf3, because after 12...Bxf4 13.exf4 followed by Ne5, the knight cannot be expelled with ...f6, showing a negative side of 9...h5.

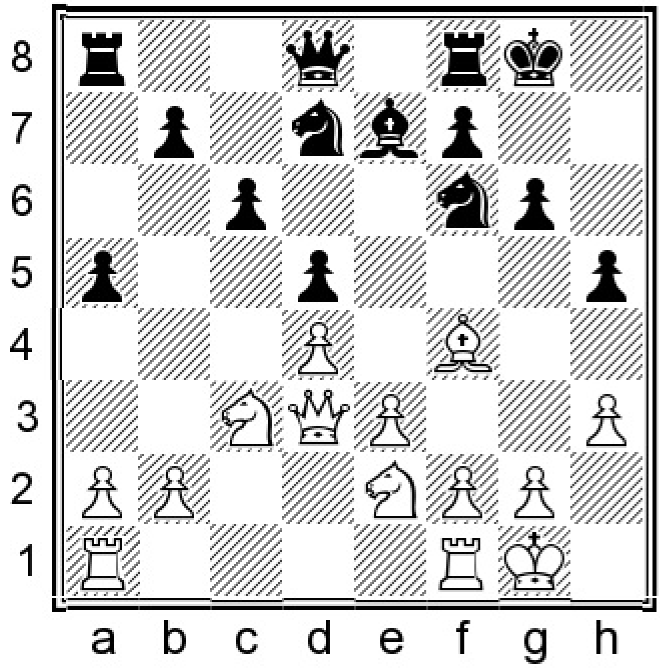
12.Nge2

And Carlsen has got what he wanted, although he has no significant advantage yet.

12...a5

12...0-0 is more flexible, although it would be very similar to the game.

13.0-0 0-0



Exercise (simple): How shall White proceed?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.f3!

The advance e4 is one of the basic ideas behind the development of the knight to e2.

14...b5?!

Black makes progress on the queenside but the resulting position will be unfavourable.

An interesting suggestion is 14...h4, aiming to support the d5-pawn without taking on e4. After 15.e4 Nb6 16.Bh2 Black plays 16...Nh5!, trying to hamper the mobility of the e2-knight.

15.e4

Now White threatens 16.exd5 and also 16.e5, followed by f4–f5 after withdrawing the f4-bishop.

15...dxe4 16.fxe4

White's prospects, with a strong center, are slightly better.

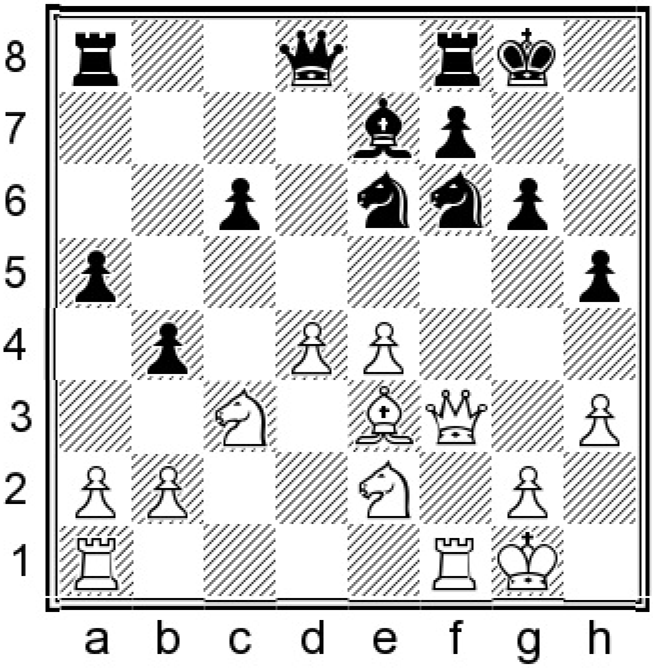
16...Nc5 17.Qf3

17.Qe3 was also possible, defending d4 and being ready to answer 17...Ne6 with 18.Bh6.

17...Ne6 18.Be3

White had several options. Even 18.Rad1 was possible, because 18...Nxf4 19.Nxf4 is nothing to be afraid of: the white knight ends up in a good position, and White still retains a strong center.

18...b4



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.Nb1!

To renew the support of the e4-pawn and aiming to reach the good c4-square.

After 19.Na4 Nh7 White's knight could end up out of play.

19...Nh7

Threatening 20...Nhg5.

20.Nd2

Defending the e4-pawn to give more freedom to the queen.

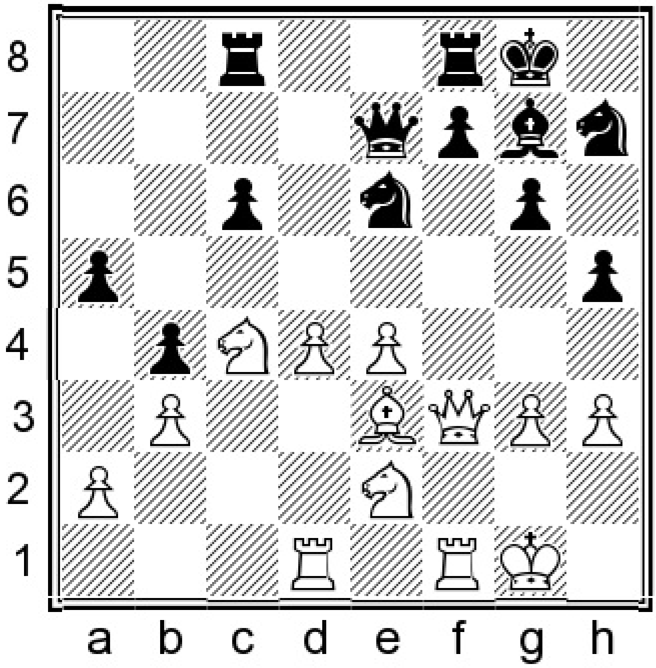
20...Rc8

After 20...Nhg5 the right answer is 21.Qg3, but not 21.Qf2 due to 21...f5!. The immediate 20...f5 fails to 21.exf5 Rxf5 22.Qxc6.

21.Rad1 Bh4 22.g3 Bf6

The alternative was 22...Bg5. After 23.Nc4 Bxe3+ 24.Qxe3 it is necessary to evaluate correctly whether the exchange of bishops proves to be more weakening for Black's position or for White's center.

23.Nc4 Bg7 24.b3 Qe7



Exercise: Threatening 25...Neg5, so how must White deal with that?

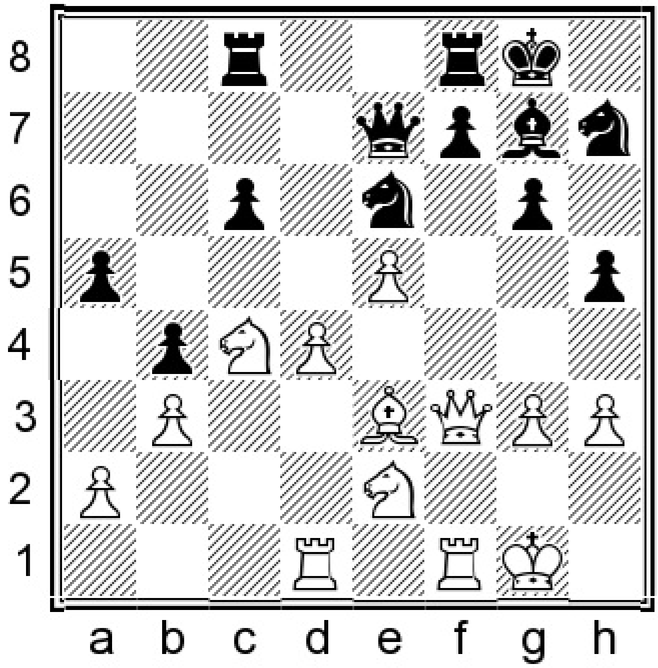
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

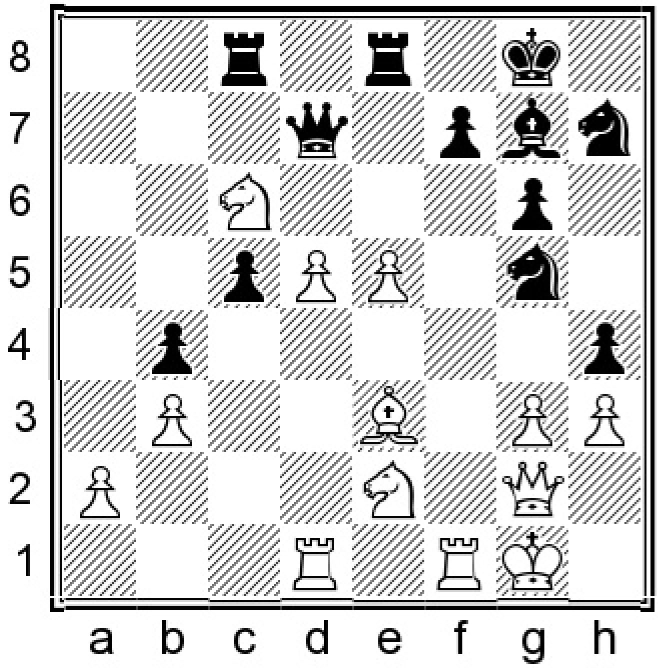
25.Qg2

Maintaining the tension, and threatening 26.d5-d6. White is better.

Carlsen chose to delay the “perpetually available” advance 25.e5!, which would be very welcome for the c4-knight.



After 25...h4 (if 25...f6 then 26.Nf4! Nxf4 27.gxf4 is very strong) 26.Nxa5 c5 (26...Nhg5 fails to 27.Qg4) 27.Nc6 Qd7 28.d5 Neg5 29.Qg2 Rfe8, there does not seem to be enough compensation for the material.



For example, 30.Bxg5 Nxg5 31.gxh4 Nxh3+ 32.Kh2 Bxe5+ 33.Nxe5 Rxe5 34.Ng3 Rce8 35.Rd2, etc.

White’s approach to this game strongly resembles Lasker’s, who in better positions used to play safe many times without entering into complications, but when he was worse, he played in the opposite way.

25...Nc7

After 25...Ra8? 26.d5 is very strong, e.g. 26...cxd5 27.exd5 Neg5 28.d6 and the passed pawn has no good blockaders in front of it. The advance also provides more good squares to the other minor pieces

26.Nxa5 Rfe8

As often happens, winning a pawn gives the opponent some counterplay, and the extra pawn is on a2, without an important role at this moment.

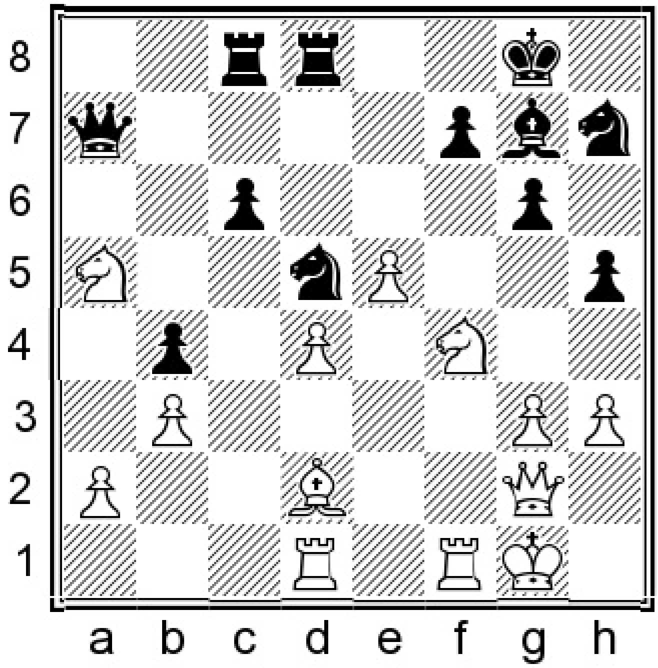
27.e5 Nd5 28.Bd2

Not 28.Nxc6? because of 28...Qd7.

28...Red8 29.Nf4 Qa7?!

The g1–a7 diagonal will not give Black the tactical opportunities he is aiming for.

The engines and many commentators suggested the more tenacious 29...Qc7!, and after 30.Nc4, pressurising the a2-pawn with 30...Ra8.



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

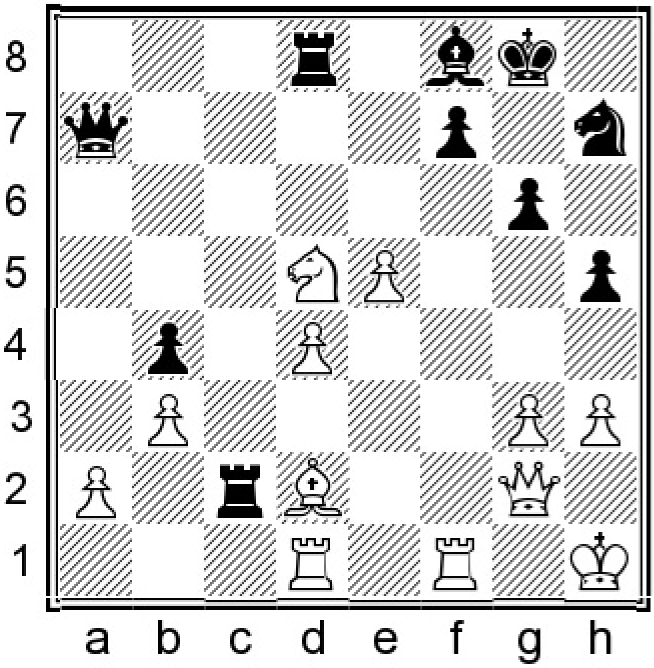
30.Nxc6!

White is now two pawns up, though conceding more activity to Black.

30...Rxc6 31.Nxd5 Rc2

31...Qxd4+? was not possible due to 32.Be3 Qxe5 33.Ne7+ Qxe7 34.Rxd8+ Qxd8 35.Qxc6, winning.

32.Kh1 Bf8



White is two pawns up, but they are under attack, and Black has active major pieces.

Exercise: How should White cope with Black's activity? By defending? Or is it possible to take advantage of the kingside weakened by 9...h5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

33.e6!

The second idea is the right one, as this advance is almost winning.

33...Qa8

If 33...fxe6 then 34.Qe4! wins. It is not possible to win material with 34...Rxd2 due to 35.Qxg6+ Qg7 (or 35...Kh8 36.Rxd2 exd5 37.Rf7) 36.Qxe6+ and Rxd2.

If 33...f5 then 34.g4! follows.

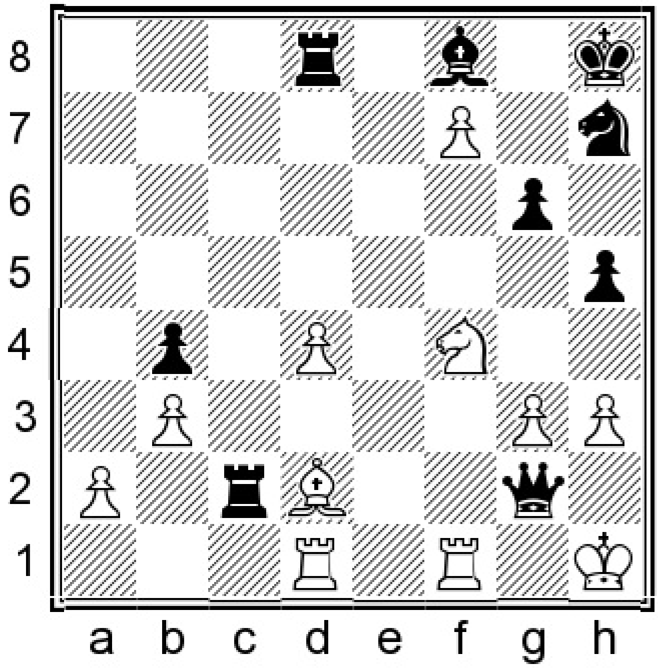
34.exf7+

The simple 34.e7! was also the strongest move. White wins after 34...Rxd5 35.e8=Q Qxe8 36.Qxd5, and the exchange up gives a winning advantage.

34...Kh8?

The king doesn't choose the best retreat as we shall see, and 34...Kg7! was much better.

35.Nf4 Qxg2+



Exercise: Carlsen chose the wrong recapture, so can you play better than the world champion?

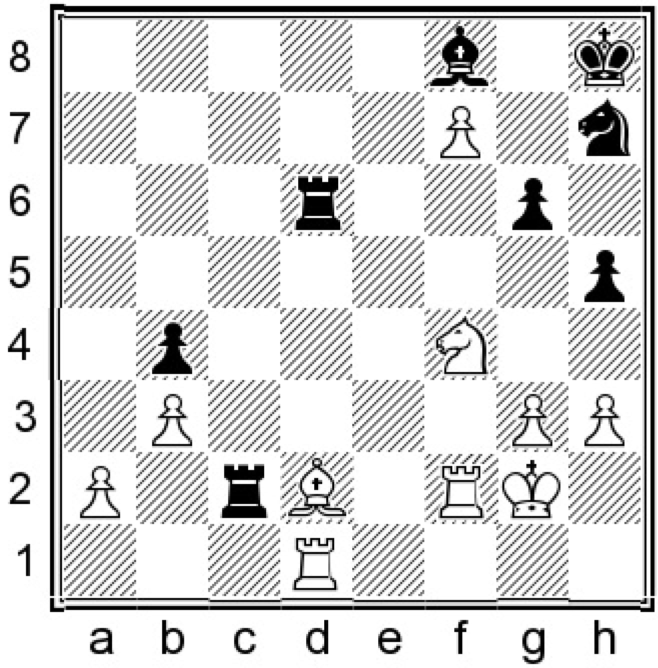
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

36.Kxg2?

36.Nxg2! was better, because after 36...Rxd4? White wins playing 37.Bc3! bxc3 38.Rxd4; 36...Kg7 37.Bf4 Be7 (or 37...Bd6 38.Rde1 Nf8 39.d5) 38.Be5+ Bf6 39.Nf4 is no better, etc.

36...Rxd4 37.Rf2 Rd6



Exercise: What is the best reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38.Bc1!

The bishop unpinned itself, leading to favourable simplifications.

38...Rxf2+ 39.Kxf2 Rxd1 40.Bb2+

We can see clearly in this line that Black's king was much better placed on g7, whereas Black must now give up two minor pieces for the rook.

40...Nf6

Forced. Not 40...Bg7?? 41.Nxg6#.

41.Bxf6+ Kh7 42.Ne6 Bd6

If 42...Bh6? then 43.Ng5+! Bxg5 44.f8=Q, winning.

43.Be5 Be7 44.f8=Q

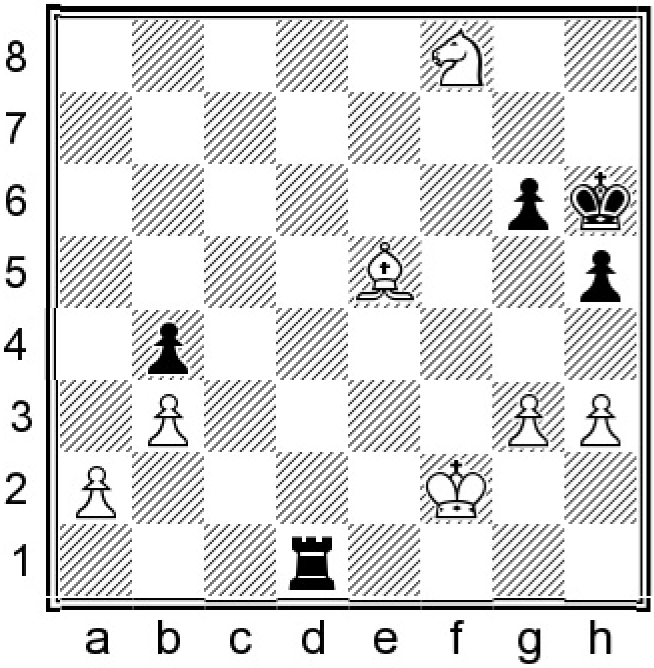
44.Ke2! was more accurate (or he could have begun with 44.Bf6!), and Black's rook has no satisfactory square to go. Let's see:

44...Rg1 45.Bd4 Rxg3? 46.Bf6 Bd6 47.Be5, winning.

If 44...Rh1 then 45.Bf6 Bd6 46.h4 Rh2+ 47.Kd3 Rxa2 48.Be5 Be7 49.f8=Q Bxf8 50.Nxf8+ Kh6 51.Ne6, with an easy win. Black's b-pawn is lost and the g3-pawn is easily defended.

Something similar happens after 44...Rd5 45.Bf6 Bd6 46.f8=Q Bxf8 47.Nxf8+ Kh6 48.Ne6, etc.

44...Bxf8 45.Nxf8+ Kh6



Exercise: What is now the more precise answer?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

46.Ne6?!

Once again, the intermediate move 46.Ke2! was better. After 46...Rg1 (or 46...Rd5 47.Bf4+ Kg7 48.Ne6+ Kf6 49.Nc7 Ra5 50.h4!, he cements the kingside, to capture the b-pawn later, which is winning. Also 46...Rh1 47.h4 g5 48.Bf6 gxh4 49.Bxh4 Rh2+ 50.Kd3 Rxa2 51.Kc4 is winning for White) 47.Ne6 (47.h4 is also strong, even allowing 47...g5! creating a white weakness, as in the game, and then 48.Bf6 g4 49.Bg5+ Kg7 50.Ne6+ Kf7 51.Kf2! Ra1 52.Nd4 Rxa2+ 53.Ke3 Ra8 54.Kd3 Rc8 55.Bd2, winning) 47...g5 48.Bd6 Kg6 49.Nd4, with a better formation than that obtained in the game, e.g.: 49...Rh1 50.Bxb4 Rxh3 51.Be1!

46...g5

46...Rd2+ 47.Ke3 Rxa2 48.Bf4+ Kh7 49.Kd3 loses easily, because the b-pawn is lost too quickly.

47.h4

47.Ke2 is answered, even more strongly than before, with 47...Rh1.

47...gxh4 48.gxh4 Kg6 49.Nd4 Rd3

49...Rd2+ 50.Ke3 Rxa2 51.Kd3 gives more freedom to White's king, so Aronian tries to limit his activity.

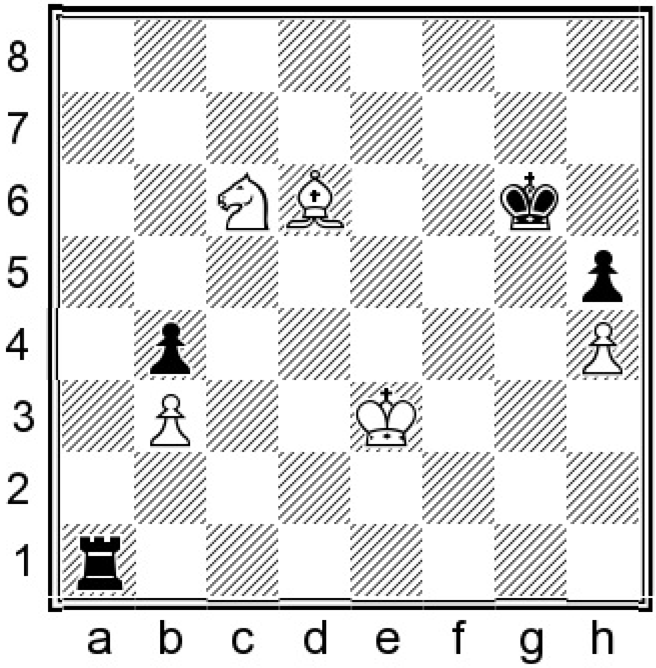
50.Nc6

The line 50.Ke2 Rh3 51.Bd6 Rxh4 52.Nf3 Rh1 53.Bxb4 h4 54.Kf2 Kf5 55.Kg2 Rb1 56.Nxh4+ Kg4 57.Nf3 Rb2+ 58.Nd2 Rxa2 59.Kf2 is winning according to the engines. It is mate in another 69(!!!) moves, but Carlsen plays as a human, with calculation joined with logic, not trusting such complicated lines as a computer does.

50...Rd2+ 51.Ke3 Rxa2 52.Bd6

52.Nxb4? is bad due to 52...Ra3.

52...Ra1

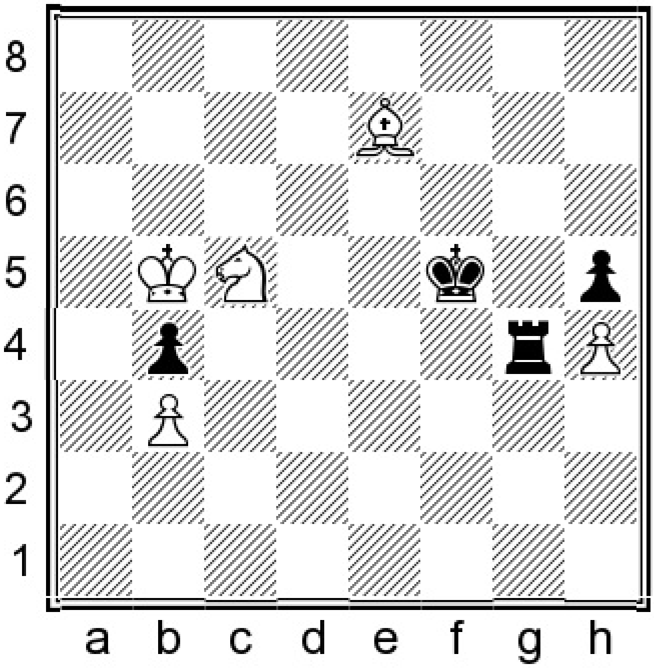


53.Kd4

"Two minor pieces are stronger than a rook if they are in control, but sometimes converting the advantage can be very tedious," in the words of endings expert German Grandmaster Karsten Mueller.

53...Rg1

53...Rh1 was considered to be better, but Mueller shows it was not a saving move, although it was "somewhat more tenacious, but sooner or later the rook will be encircled by the systematic manoeuvring of the minor pieces," e.g. 54.Be7 Rh3 55.Ne5+ (not 55.Kc4? Rc3+) 55...Kf5 56.Nd3 Rg3 57.Kc4 Rg4+ 58.Kb5 Rg3 59.Nc5 Rg4

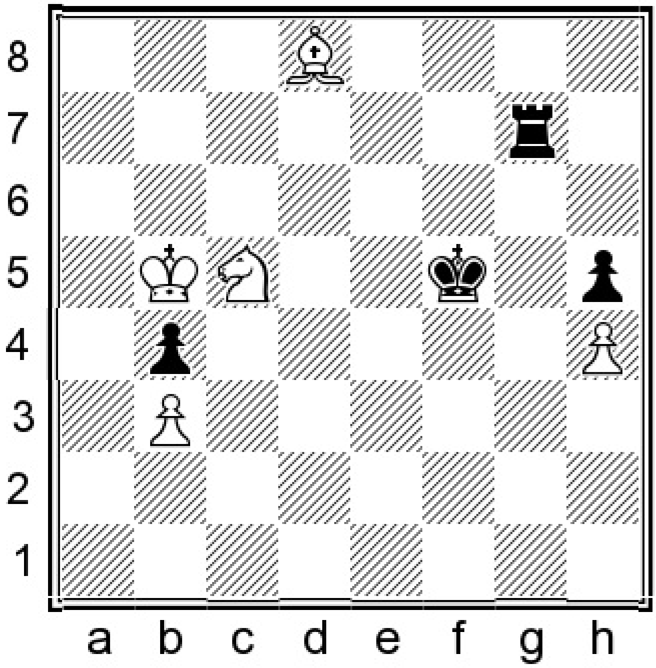


Exercise: What should White play now?

Show/Hide Solution

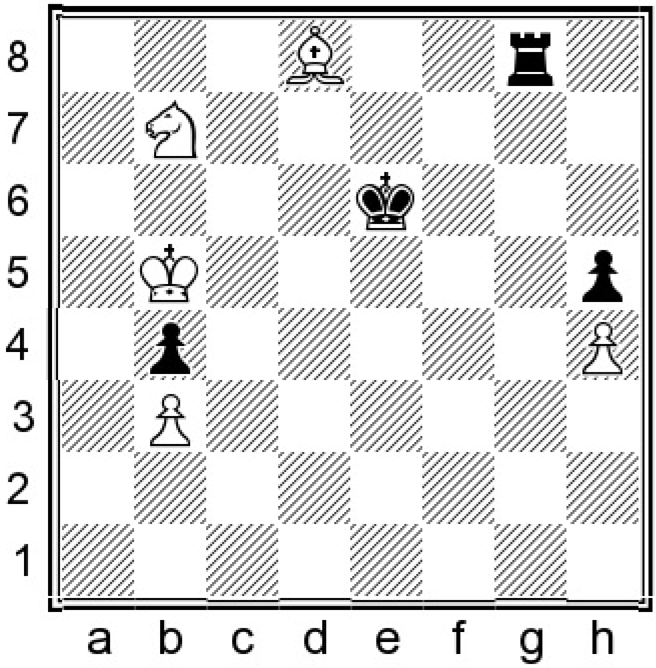
Answer: 60.Bg5? "runs into the hammer blow" 60...Rxg5!. Black is just in time to equalize after: 61.hxg5 h4 62.Ne4 h3 63.Nf2 h2 64.Kxb4 Kxg5 65.Kc3 Kf4 66.Kd2 Kf3 67.Ke1 Ke3, and the monarch captures the remaining white pawn.

60.Bd8! is the right move. After 60...Rd4 61.Bg5 Rg4 62.Be7 Rg7 (or 62...Rd4 63.Na6 Rd7 64.Bg5 Ke5 65.Nxb4 Rb7+ 66.Kc5 Ke4 67.Bd8 Rb8 68.Bc7 Rc8 69.Nd5, and finally the pawn advances) 63.Bd8 (63.Bg5? again allows 63...Rxg5!)



Now if 63...Rg4 64.Nb7 Ke6 65.Na5 Rg8 66.Nc6 Rg7 67.Bg5 Rb7+ 68.Ka6 Rc7 69.Kb6 Rc8 70.Kb5 Kd6, White can take advantage of the weak h5-pawn to destroy the coordination of the black defensive setup. Let's see: 71.Ne7 Rb8+ 72.Kc4 Ke6 73.Nd5 Rc8+ 74.Kd4 Rb8 75.Nf4+ Kf5 76.Kc4 Kg4 77.Nd5 and the pawn finally falls.

If black plays 63...Rg8 there could follow 64.Nb7 Ke6 (if 64...Kg4 then 65.Kc4! wins [postponing the capture of the pawn; now Black must give up his ideal arrangement of pieces and his king must attack the h4-pawn, whereas 65.Kxb4? Rxd8 66.Nxd8 Kxh4 is a draw, as the engines say] 65...Rh8 [65...Rxd8 does not save Black now: 66.Nxd8 Kxh4 67.Kd3! Kg3 68.Ke2 h4 69.Kf1 Kf3 70.Nc6, winning] 66.Bg5 Rg8 67.Nc5 Rb8 68.Nd7, and the h5-pawn is the one who is captured)



Exercise: What is now the most accurate move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: “The greedy 65.Kxb4? spoils things: 65...Kd7 66.Kb5 Kc8 67.Ka6 Rg7 68.Nc5 Rg6+ 69.Bb6 Rg4, and draw” (Mueller).

It is necessary to restrain Black’s king before taking the pawn with 65.Kc5!, e.g.: 65...Kd7 66.Bg5 Ke6 67.Nd6 Ke5 68.Nc4+ Ke4 69.Kxb4, winning.

Now we understand the meaning of Mueller’s comment that “converting the advantage can be very tedious.”

Let’s get back to the game.

54.Kc5

“Magnus steers his king masterfully” (Mueller), not 54.Kc4?? Rg4+.

54...Kf5

Not 54...Rg4? 55.Ne5+. If 54...Rh1 then 55.Be7 Rc1+ 56.Kb5 Rc3 57.Nd4, winning.

55.Nxb4 Rc1+ 56.Kd4 Re1

56...Rd1+ 57.Nd3 Ke6 58.Bf4 is easy for White.

57.Nc6

The b-pawn is quick enough to win after the loss of the h-pawn.

57...Re4+ 58.Kd5!

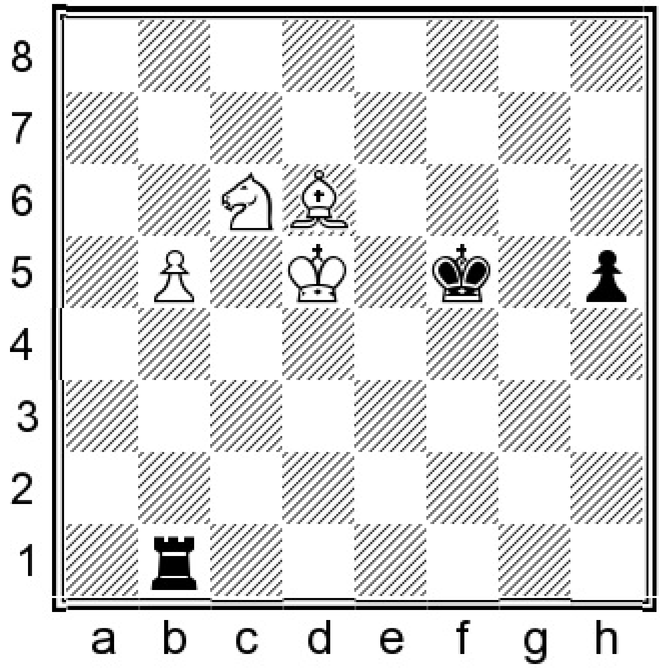
“Bodycheck!” (Mueller).

58...Rxh4 59.b4

Carlsen, exhausted after the game, said 59.Nd4+ was better, to reduce Black’s options, but in fact there is no big difference.

59...Rh1 60.b5 Rb1

If 60...h4 then 61.b6 wins, for example: 61...Rb1 62.Nb4 (62.Nd4+ is also good) 62...h3 63.Kc5 Rd1 64.b7 Rxd6 65.b8=Q, etc.



Exercise: And now what is the most accurate move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

61.Nd4+!

The knight plays on both flanks, as Mueller stated. From their ideal posts both knight and bishop collaborate perfectly to advance White's only pawn and stop the Black one.

61.Nb4? on the other hand, lets Black hold the ending: 61...Rd1+ 62.Kc6 (or 62.Kc5 Rc1+ 63.Kd4 Rd1+ 64.Nd3 Ke6 65.Bg3 Kd7, and White's pawn is halted) 62...Ke6 63.Bc5 h4 64.b6 h3 65.b7 h2 66.b8=Q h1=Q+.

61...Kg4

Carlsen thought Black had to play 61...Kf6, but White also wins after 62.Kc6 Rc1+ 63.Bc5 h4 64.b6 h3 65.Nf3! Kf5 66.b7 Rb1 67.Bb6, etc.

62.Kc6

Now it is very easy, as Carlsen said.

62...Rc1+ 63.Kd7

Not 63.Bc5? h4 and a draw!

63...Rb1

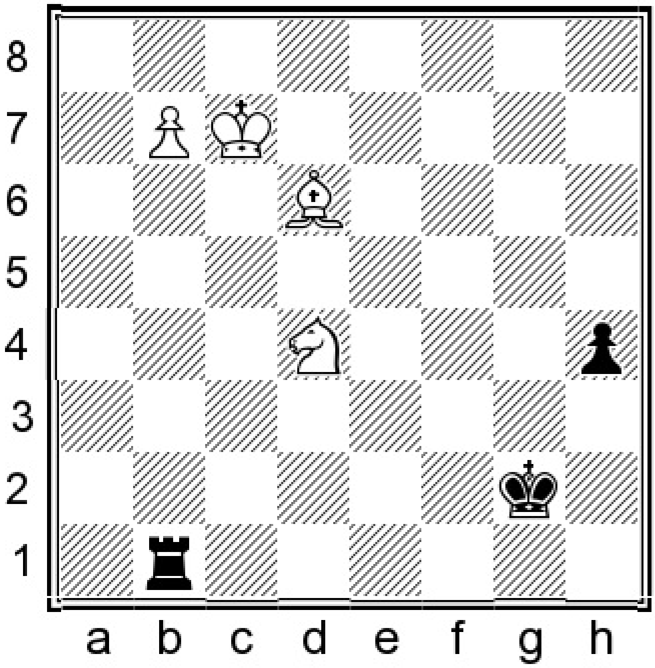
After 63...Rd1 White’s pawn promotes: 64.b6 Rxd4 65.b7, etc.

64.Kc7 h4 65.b6 Kh3

The black pawn is neutralized after 65...h3 66.b7 Rc1+ 67.Kd7 Rb1 68.b8=Q Rxb8 69.Bxb8 and mate in 28 moves, say the engines.

66.b7 Kg2

66...Rc1+ 67.Kb6 is quicker.



67.Nf5!

But not 67.b8=Q?? Rxb8 68.Kxb8 h3 and draw.

67...h3 68.Nh4+

There would follow 68...Kg1 69.b8=Q Rxb8 70.Kxb8 h2 71.Nf3+.

1–0

Playing a Carlsbad structure again, Carlsen profited from an ambitious black kingside pawn advance to gain a small advantage. His advantage was greater in the middlegame, and a quick finish would not be unexpected.

Carlsen claimed to journalists: “I was completely winning, of course. All I had to do was to try and find the most accurate way to win.”

But Aronian fought back for all he was worth and came very close to escaping with a half-point. “I didn’t feel good about that but I had to go on, and in the end I won mostly by luck. But a win is a win,” said Carlsen, after this 68-move battle.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) The move order is important, including in the opening. (3...Be7! 7.h3!)

2.) “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” If we can find the right answers, we’ll probably discover the correct plan. (7.h3! 9.Qd2! *9.*B*d3?* 10.Bd3! *22...*B*g5!*)

3.) We must detect and react properly to a new situation. (10.Bd3!)

4.) It helps to be familiar with the typical manoeuvres in the positions we are playing. (14.f3!)

5.) We must readapt to a new situation, such as a change in the pawn structure. (9...h5 14...b5)

6.) “How can I improve the position of my pieces?” This is another question which, posed at the right moment, can lead us to finding the best move. (19.Nb1!)

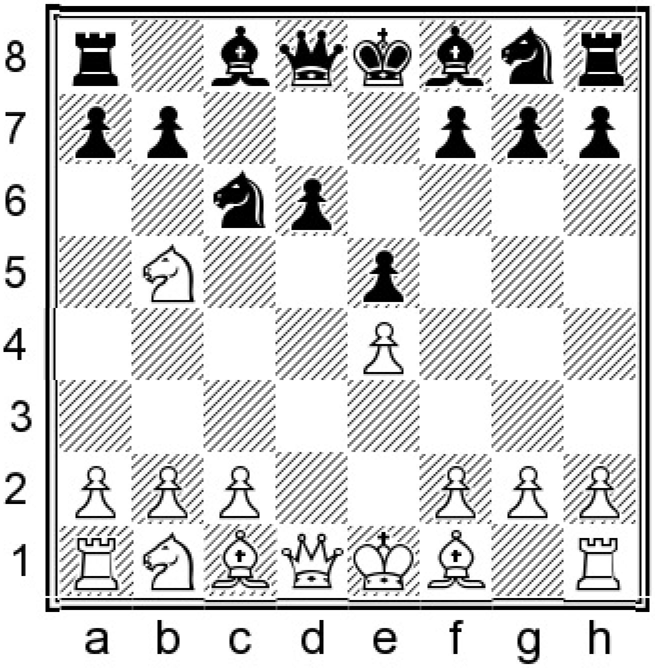
7.) The king’s security is almost always a key factor of a position. (33.e6!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 8

Magnus Carlsen – Hikaru Nakamura
Sicilian Defence [B32]
Wijk aan Zee (12), 26.01.2013

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 e5 5.Nb5 d6



“This line is called the Kalashnikov Sicilian and the joker who came up with that name obviously wanted to please the National Rifle Association.” (Kavalek). It is the only variation which has the name of a weapon.

It is similar to the Pelikan or Sveshnikov Variation, played with the moves 5...Nf6 6.N1c3 d6, the main difference being the situation of the g-knight, as it is still undeveloped. Black generally plays ...Nge7, defending d5 as well, and leaving the f-pawn free to advance with ...f5.

6.g3

Evgeny Sveshnikov, obviously an expert in the variation with his name, and also one of the first to employ the Kalashnikov systematically, doesn't rate this side-line very highly. Generally White, not having been forced to play Nc3, plays 6.c4.

At the press conference after the game Carlsen said he knew it had already been played by Nunn, and besides "it is not a bad move either."

6...h5

Carlsen thought this might be Nakamura's answer, and he thought it was reasonable, but if the intention was to bother or frighten his opponent, it didn't succeed. Carlsen said he "wasn't particularly nervous" about it.

There were several possibilities. Sveshnikov believed that the critical variation was 6...Nf6 7.Bg5 (he replied 7...Bg4 to 7.Bg2 several times).

6...Be7 is also possible and 6...a6 7.N5c3 Nf6 as well. In this case, Bg5 is not so strong, but White's knights may move one to d5 and the other to c3, instead of being on a3.

7.N1c3

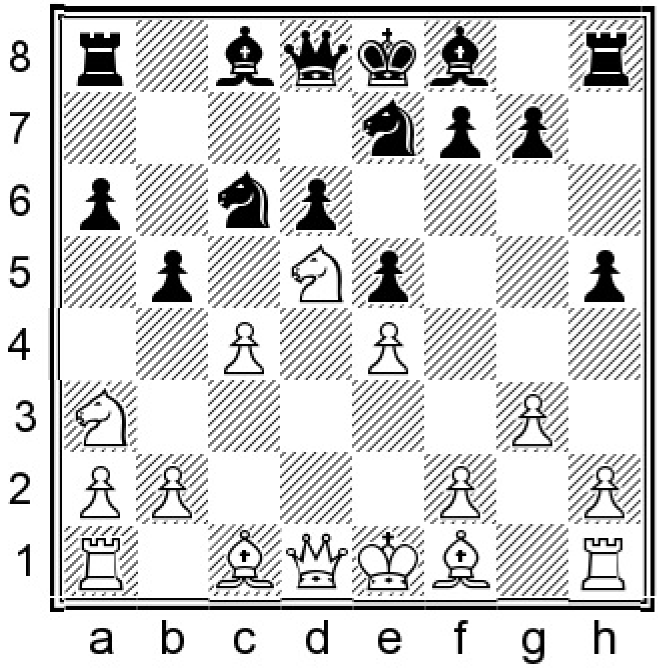
"Just force him to weaken his queenside a little bit" (Carlsen). 8.Nd5 is threatened.

7...a6 8.Na3 b5

Sveshnikov thought 8...h4 was more logical, although it is unclear whether taking later on g3, opening the f- or h-files, is advantageous for Black; in that case White could play e.g. 9.Nc4 or 9.Be3.

9.Nd5 Nge7 10.Bg2

Question: Isn't it good to play on the queenside with 10.c4?



Show/Hide Solution

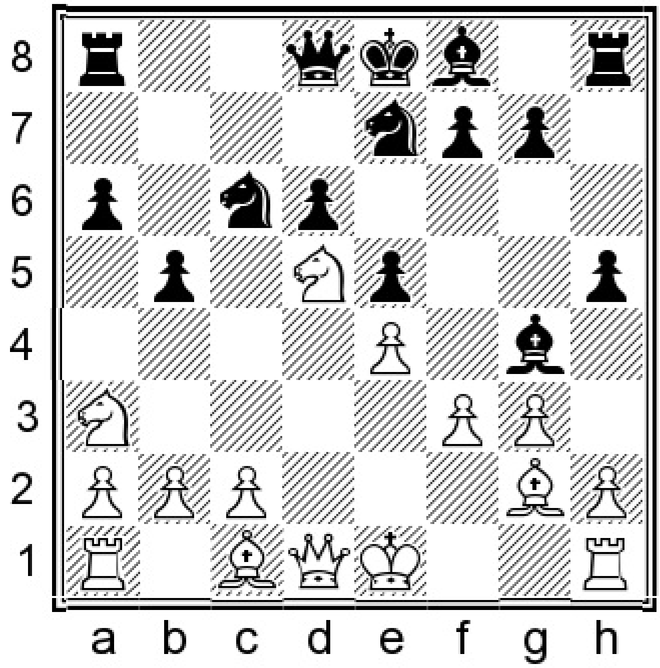
Answer: In the previous game between them we saw Carlsen powerfully opening up the position with 13.f4, but now the situation is different. Carlsen thought that at this moment, with the weaknesses he has on the kingside, he has to be careful about going for 10.c4 immediately.

There could follow 10...Nd4, threatening ...Bg4, and then Black could also take on d5. White cannot recapture with a piece, so the d6-pawn would not be a weakness anymore.

10...Bg4

Carlsen was expecting 10...Nxd5 11.exd5 Ne7 and, compared with the game, we see that this would be better. He would have to choose between 12.c4 Bd7 and 12.c3 followed by Nc2 “and play for either a4 or f4 at some point.”

11.f3



11...Be6

Carlsen was surprised by this move, as he expected 11...Bd7 so that Black was able to take on d5 with the knight at some point, e.g. after 12.c4, he expected 12...Nxd5 13.cxd5 Nd4 14.Be3 h4 15.0-0 and White is a little better.

Anyway, Carlsen thought Black was still fine.

Exercise: There are several possibilities for White now, which one did Carlsen choose?

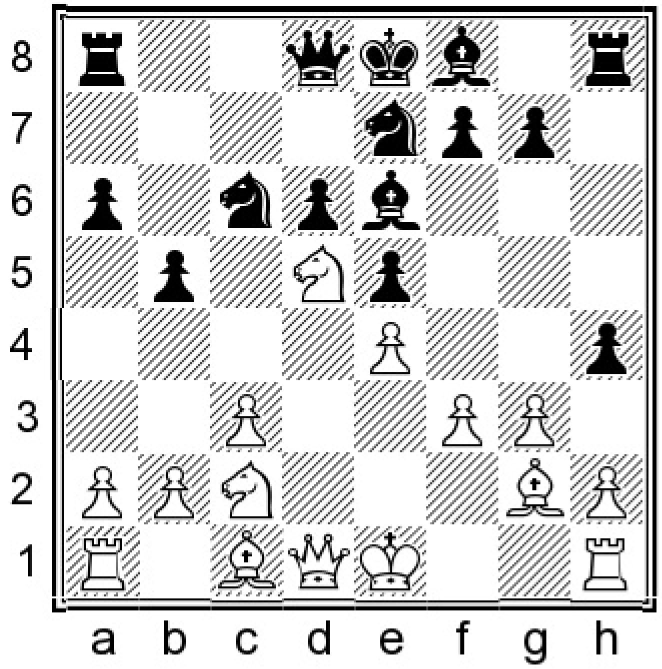
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.c3

It was possible to develop the bishop with 12.Be3 or 12.Bg5, but Carlsen plays a more flexible continuation, first improving the activity of his worst placed piece. This is a typical manoeuvre, to follow with Nc2 and the a4 or f4 break at some point, as Carlsen mentioned before.

12...h4 13.Nc2



13...Bxd5?!

“This is not pretty, but I think this is the best he can do now,” said Carlsen. However, Black gives up the two bishops and control of some important white squares. It seems that if Carlsen thought this was best, then Black’s position is not healthy anymore.

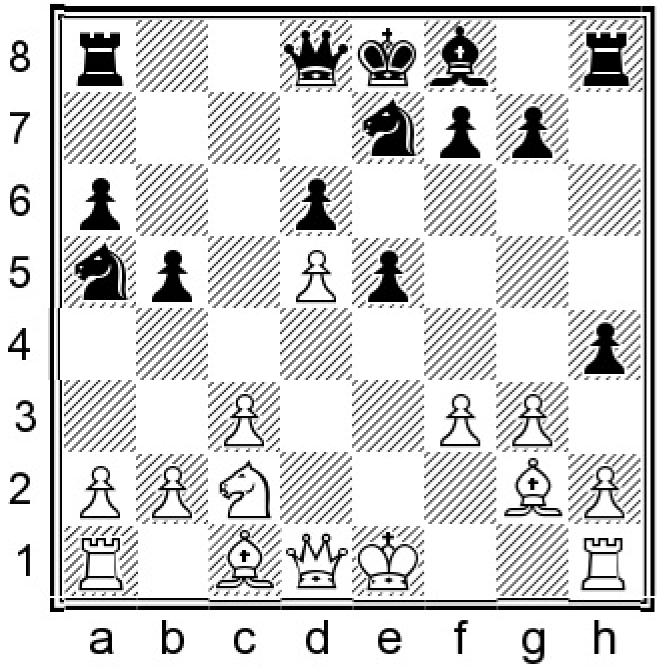
13...h3 14.Bf1 was pointless for Black: the bishop is well-placed on f1. White can add forces and attack the vulnerable pawn on b5 with a4, and Black gains nothing putting his pawn on h3.

Instead of exchanging the bishop at this point we could suggest playing 13...Na5!? first, and after 14.Nce3 to take on d5 with the knight. After 14...Nxd5 15.Nxd5 Rc8, if white plays 16.a4 Black can demonstrate the merit of his move 12...h4 without taking on g3 and of not having exchanged his bishop earlier with the sequence 16...Bxd5! (or 16...hxg3 first) 17.exd5 (17.Qxd5 leaves the first rank rather weak after 17...hxg3 18.hxg3 Rxh1+ 19.Bxh1, where 19...b4! is strong, then 20.cxb4? even loses due to 20...Qb6) 17...hxg3 18.hxg3 Rxh1+ 19.Bxh1 Qb6, etc.

When this possibility was mentioned to him, Carlsen admitted he hadn’t thought much about it, but after a few moments’ thought he said it was an option.

Finally, although 13...hxg3 14.hxg3 Rxh1+ 15.Bxh1 is still possible, all (optimistic) attacking chances begun with 6...h5 would be gone.

14.exd5 Na5



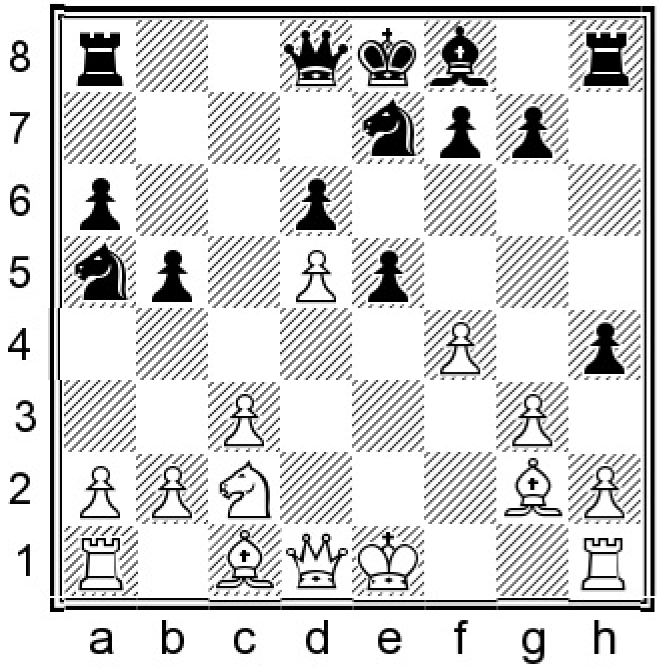
Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15.f4!

Making the position sharper in the center, White wants to activate his light-squared bishop to take advantage of the incomplete development of the black forces.



15...Nf5?!

Question: I see you don’t like this move. What was better?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black wanted to keep the option of playing ...h3 later. However, Carlsen considered Black “definitively needs to take on g3,” and after 15...hxg3 16.hxg3 Rxh1+ 17.Bxh1, “and maybe 17...Qd7”, 18.Bg2 exf4 19.Bxf4 Ng6 20.Be3 Be7, “to, at least, develop some pieces.”

Anyway, he thought White was already much better.

Had Black chosen this line, Carlsen would surely have improved on it, because 20...Nc4 is stronger than 20...Be7.

He would probably have played 20.Qd4 (or 20.Qf3), instead of preserving his f4-bishop, without fearing 20...Nxf4 21.gxf4 Qg4 22.Ne3 Qh4+ 23.Ke2, threatening Rh1, with the idea of opening up the game even more with a4, or b4 followed by a4.

In any case, as we shall see very soon, the disappearance of the pair of rooks would have been a relief for Black, as after what was played the h8-rook became much less valuable than the rook which is now on h1 in just a few moves.

Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen punish Black’s imprecision?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.g4!

“Forcing the black knight to the edge.” (Kavalek)

Question: Isn’t it a little risky to advance this pawn and weaken the kingside a little more?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: White continues winning space, and yes, his kingside is more exposed, but White’s spatial advantage and his control of the light squares means he has no need to fear the slight “activity” Black gets.

16...h3 17.Be4 Nh4

Carlsen showed that the check on h4 isn’t dangerous, as after 17...Qh4+ 18.Kf1 Ne7 (or 18...Nh6 19.Rg1 “and I don’t see really what he can do”) 19.Qe2, the black queen alone can do almost nothing, and White continues to improve his position without hindrance.

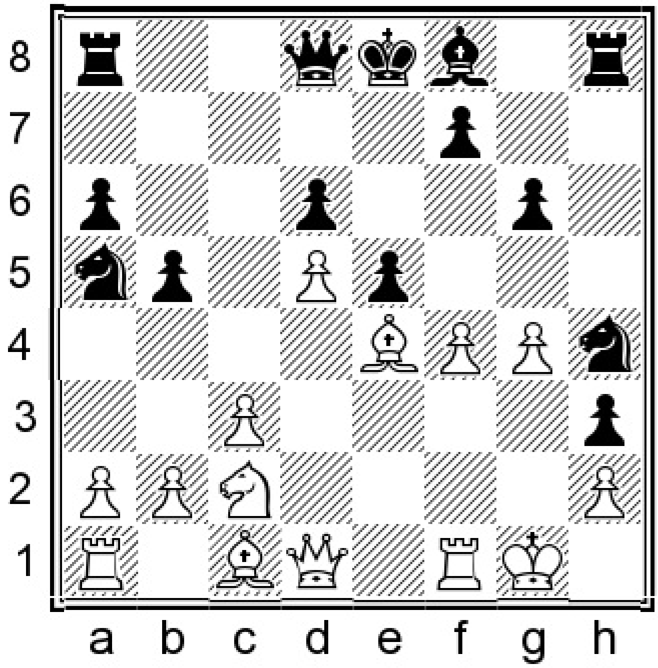
18.0-0

Carlsen thought he was much better at this point, because all his pieces were in good positions.

18...g6

If 18...Be7 then 19.Qd3 is possible among other moves, and Black's compensation for the pawn after 19...Qd7 20.Qxh3 0-0-0 etc. is hardly sufficient.

Of course, the engines believe there is not enough compensation.



Exercise: What should White play now? Is it dangerous to allow ...f5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.Kh1!

"I thought there was no reason to prevent 19...f5, since I thought it only weakens his position," Carlsen explained after the game.

He believed 19.fxe5 dxe5 20.d6 was also objectively good for White, but there is no need to complicate the game as he had alternative ways to continue that were quieter and equally strong (Lasker's approach).

19...Bg7

After 19...f5 20.Bd3 e4 21.Be2 Carlsen mentioned all the factors that favour White: the h3-pawn is weak, White can play Nd4–e6, add more tension to the game with a4, and he can also play gxf5 and occupy the g-file with Rg1.

20.f5!

Playing against the h4-knight, to isolate it.

The other possibility was to open the game with 20.fxe5, when Black has two unpleasant choices.

20...Bxe5 keeps the bishop active, but it allows 21.Nd4. Meanwhile, after 20...dxe5 White has several attractive moves, including 21.Nb4 and 21.Qd3 to take the h3-pawn.

Black's pieces are not coordinated and the light squares belong to White, which restrains any possible counterplay by Black.

20...gxf5 21.gxf5

Logical and good, and now "Both black knights are on the rim and out of play." (Kavalek).

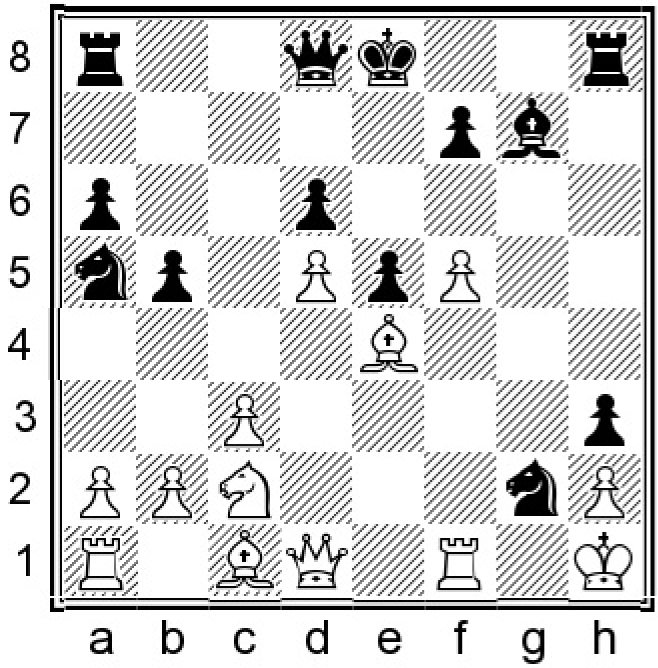
21.Bxf5 was also strong, maintaining more open files.

21...Ng2?!

This allows White to grab more space.

21...Bf6 was considered best, and there could follow 22.Nb4 Qb6 23.a4, "moving" the position. This clearly favours White: his king will always be safer, with pieces placed harmoniously and without forgetting Black's weak h-pawn.

21...Bh6 was also suggested, but it is not a big improvement for Black either. After the exchange of dark-squared bishops his dark squares also suffer, e.g. 22.Bxh6 Rxh6 23.f6! planning Qg4, while after 23...Rxf6?! 24.Qh5 White's pieces will soon take full control of the kingside.



Exercise: Carlsen played the strongest move now, which one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22.f6!

Carlsen thought that Nakamura might have overlooked this advance, which wins even more terrain.

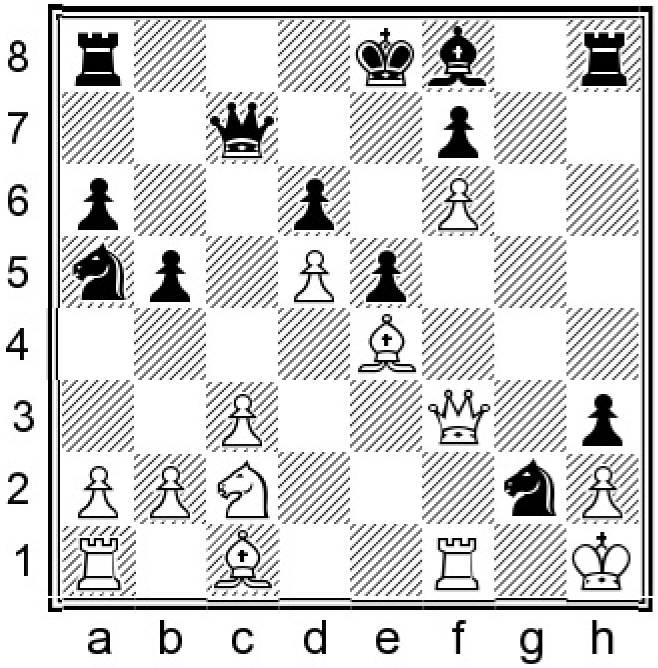
22...Bf8

After 22...Bxf6 23.Qf3 Rh4 (or 23...Nf4 24.Bxf4 exf4 25.Qxf4 Qe7 26.Qxf6 Qxe4+ 27.Rf3 Kd7 28.Qxf7+ Qe7 29.Re1, winning) 24.Bg5!, the forced exchange sacrifice 24...Rf4 gives no relief, as after 25.Bxf4 Nxf4 Black does not have enough compensation: “Although he has one nice piece, the knight on f4, he doesn’t have much else going for him” (Carlsen), and after 26.b3!, keeping the a5-knight out of play, White can play Ne3-f5, or even Nb4-c6, without forgetting about Rg1.

23.Qf3

“Now White is completely dominant, and it is no more fun for Black anymore” (Carlsen). It is a matter of time before White penetrates Black’s position and deals a decisive blow, as Black has only waiting moves at his disposal.

23...Qc7



Exercise (simple): How should White continue now?

Show/Hide Solution

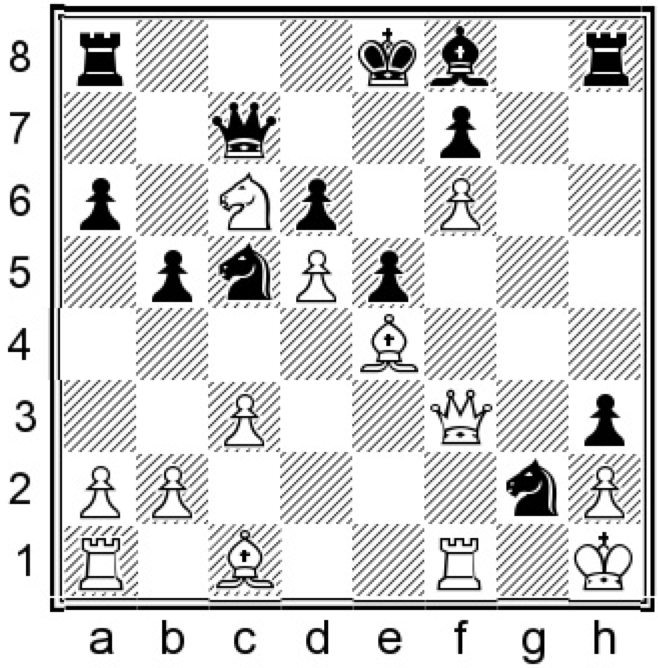
Answer:

24.Nb4

Exploiting the c6-weakness, threatening the a6-pawn, and the a4 break is also an idea in the near future.

Going back, it was also good to begin with 23.Nb4.

24...Nb7 25.Nc6 Nc5



Exercise: What is the most logical move here given the previous play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Bf5!

A powerful move. The disappearance of the h3-pawn will compromise the black knight and Black's king will also suffer.

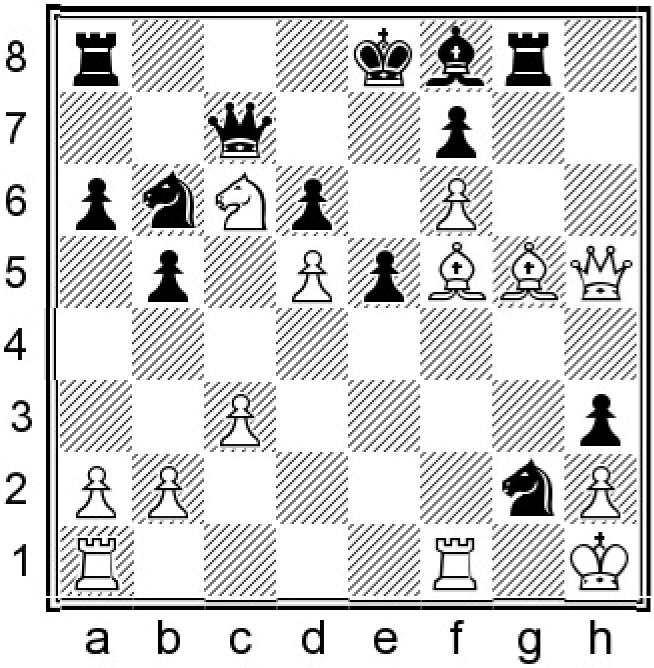
26...Nd7

Opening the h-file after 26...Nh4 27.Qxh3 doesn't give any counterplay after 27...Ng6 28.Qg3 Nh4 29.Bc2, followed by Bg5 and/or a4.

27.Bg5 Rg8

27...Nb8 loses in many ways, the quickest being 28.Nxe5 dxe5 29.d6 Qa7 30.Be4.

28.Qh5 Nb6



Exercise: How did Carlsen begin the end of the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.Be6!

The most elegant way. “Threatening 30.Ne7, among other things” (Carlsen). There is no way to resist.

29...Rxg5

If 29...Nf4 then 30.Bxf4 wins (30.Rxf4 is winning as well) 30...exf4 31.Bxf7+.

30.Qxg5 fxe6

After 30...Nf4 opening the e-file is again winning for White. There would follow 31.Rxf4 exf4 32.Qh5, threatening Bxf7+, and after 32...Nc4 to close the e-file, the quickest way to win is to occupy the g-file with 33.Rg1 followed by 34.Rg8, and the unstoppable threat Rxf8+ followed by Qh8#.

31.dxe6

Carlsen was pleased by the nice ending after 31...Qxc6 32.f7#

1–0

The game was out of book very soon. Carlsen said after the game that this was one of his best games in the tournament.

"I faced some fresh problems at the board pretty confidently, although obviously it wasn't one of his best days," he said.

He stopped Black's early expansion on the kingside, and in a more positional than tactical battle he obtained a great dynamic advantage, which finished with a nice mating attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) "Pawns don't move backwards": advancing them normally wins space, but if their advance is not prepared properly, the counterattack can be very strong. (*10.c4?* 15.f4! 16.g4! 20.f5!)

2.) Every piece exchange should be carefully considered. (13...Bxd5? *13...Na5! 15...hxg3!*)

3.) The king's safety is almost always one of the key factors of a position. A chance to weaken the enemy king's position must be seriously considered. (22.f6!)

4.) "Chess is a team sport": we need the collaboration of as many of our players as possible. (23.Qf3! 24.Nb4! 26.Bf5!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Show in Text Mode

Game 9
Magnus Carlsen – Boris Gelfand
Grunfeld Defence [D78]
Zurich (1), 30.01.2014

1.c4

Question: Does Magnus play the English Opening...?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it seems this move order was intended to avoid one of Boris Gelfand's main weapons, the Grunfeld Defence.

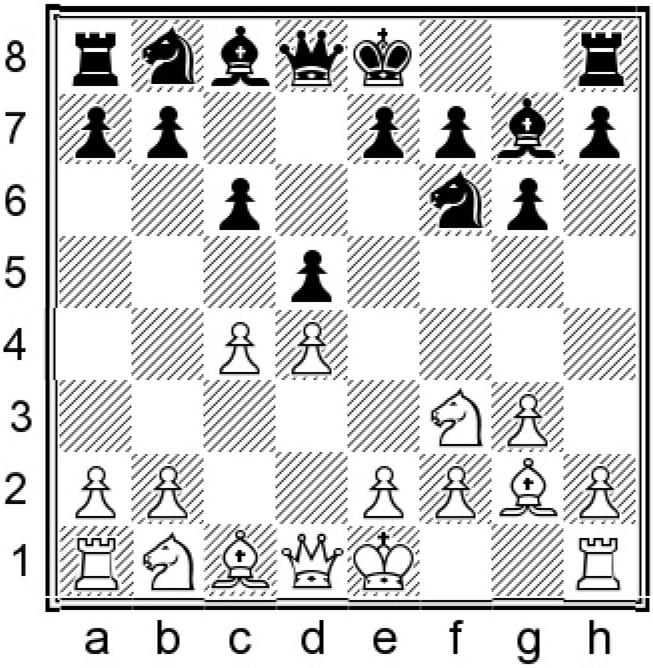
1...g6 2.d4

Question: But after what you said, this is a huge surprise, because now Black can transpose to a Grunfeld.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Right, it is surprising. Peter Heine Nielsen, Carlsen's trainer, said that one of Magnus' many strengths is his "huge flexibility and lack of dependence on a specific opening choice."

2...Nf6 3.Nf3 Bg7 4.g3 c6 5.Bg2 d5

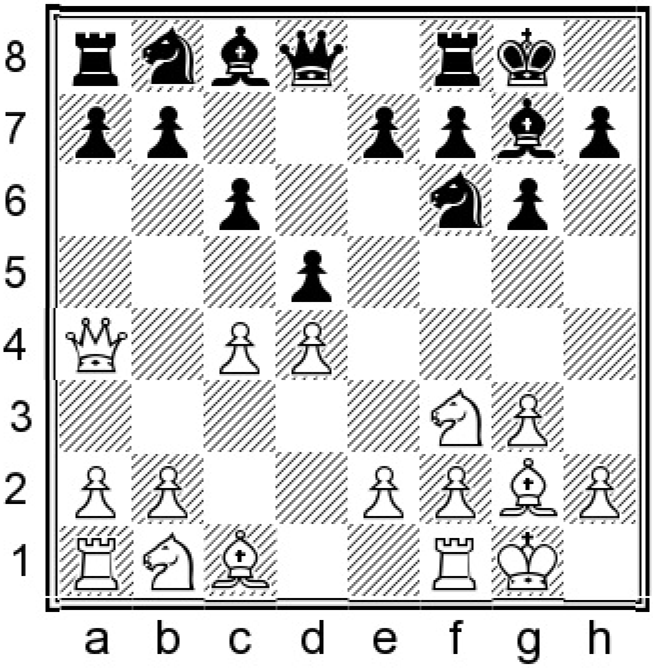


6.Qa4

This secondary line was played by Carlsen against Svidler in Linares 2007, inspired by Bent Larsen's book *ZOOM 001: Zero Hour for Operative Opening Models.*

The queen defends the c4-pawn, waiting to see how Black develops his pieces before taking concrete action.

6...0-0 7.0-0



7...Nfd7

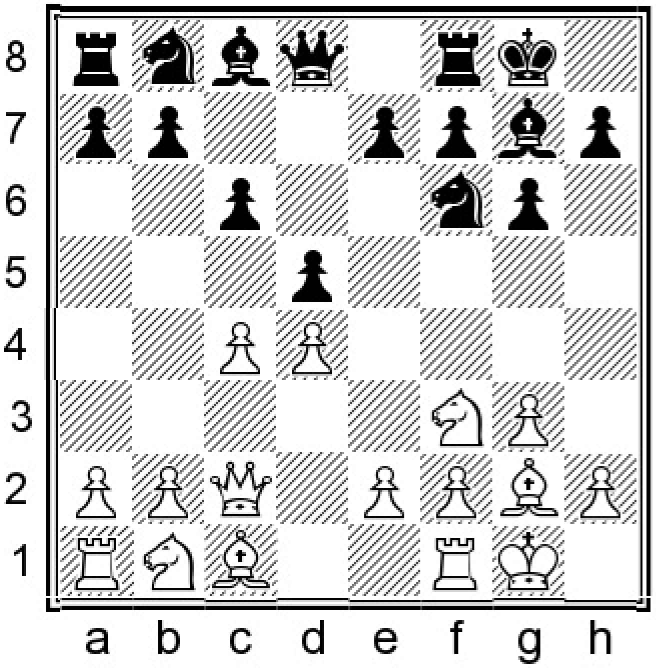
Question: This looks odd. Why not play a more natural move like 7...Nbd7?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: 7...Nbd7 has also been played, but there follows 8.cxd5, a standard reply when the b8-knight cannot move to c6, and after 8...cxd5 the knight will be misplaced.

8.Qc2 Nf6

Gelfand was trying to improve over Fressinet – Gelfand, Paris 2013, which continued 8...dxc4 9.Qxc4 Nb6 10.Qc2 Na6, but after 11.Rd1 White stood better.



Question: I would think the loss of a tempo due to the extra move Qc2 has a specific explanation, what is it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is a paradoxical decision. As I hope you noticed, it should be Black to move in this position, which could have been reached after e.g. 6.0-0 0-0 7.Qc2. Now Black will try to prove this extra move is not so useful when a timely ...Bf5 arrives.

An extra move, yes, but, strangely, it is not so easy to find a continuation where the extra move is an advantage. “In some ways, White is actually in some kind of zugzwang” (Nielsen).

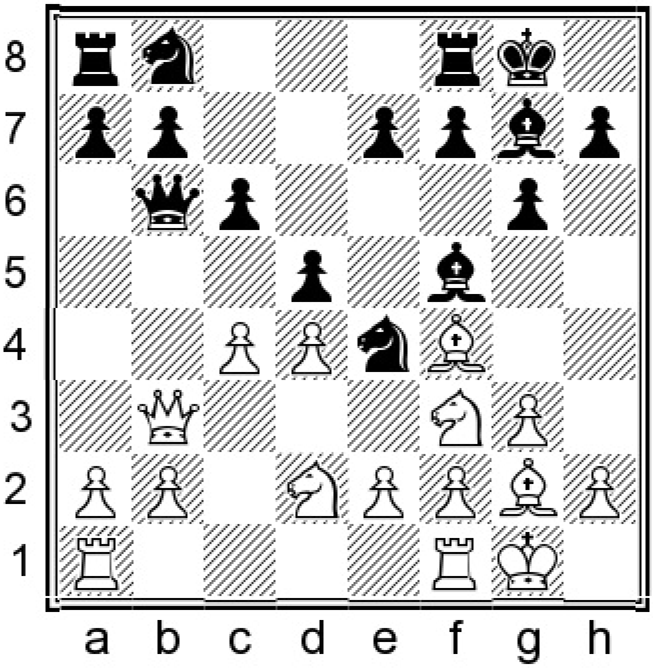
9.Bf4

Magnus thought for more than half an hour over this move.

9.Nc3 is answered by 9...dxc4, and the standard response 10.Ne5 is not possible, as the queen on c2 and not d1 allows 10...Qxd4. So 10.e4 would be necessary, which seems a reasonable pawn sacrifice, but Carlsen rejected this possibility.

After the other generally useful move 9.Rd1 Black plays 9...Bf5, and after 10.Qb3 Qb6 Black threatens 11...Qxb3 12.axb3 Bc2 due to the rook placed on d1.

9...Bf5 10.Qb3 Qb6 11.Nbd2 Ne4



Question: Why doesn’t Black continue with his development?

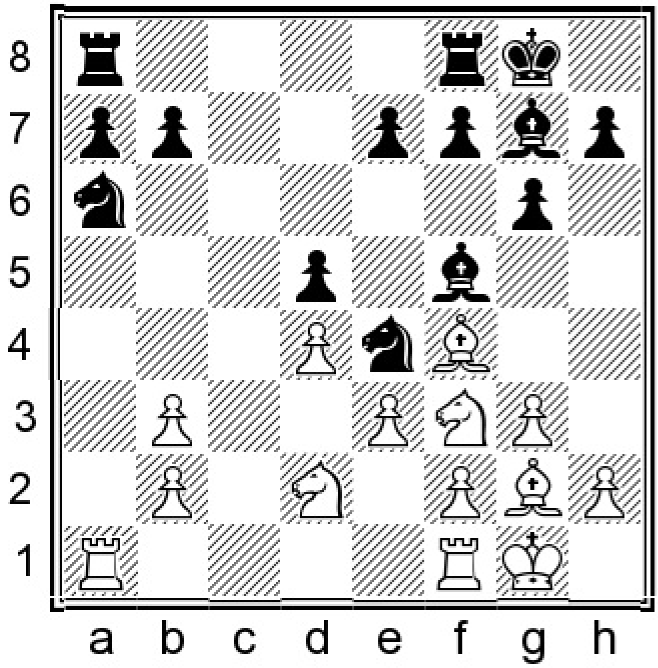
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Gelfand prefers to delay 11...Nbd7, pressing the center instead, and trying to force white to play cxd5 after which he can play ...Nc6.

This would happen in case of 12.cxd5 Qxb3 13.Nxb3 cxd5, when Black will play ...Nc6 with a good position.

Carlsen answers by maintaining the tension.

12.e3 Qxb3 13.axb3 Na6 14.cxd5 cxd5



The position seems rather dry. What compensation does White have for his doubled pawns? The knight not well situated on a6? Well, it will move to b4, so that isn't much.

Nonetheless, as Nielsen said, "After just a few more moves, almost like by magic, Carlsen suddenly has an overwhelming initiative."

Exercise: How did it start?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15.g4!

A very surprising pawn sacrifice. One of the ideas is to activate the g2-bishop.

"I don't know if it's any good but I thought about it for a while and it's too nice an idea not to play," wrote Carlsen on his website.

Rustam Kasimdzhanov wrote in social media: "Magnus played g3-g4!!", and expressed his full respect for such amazing confidence.

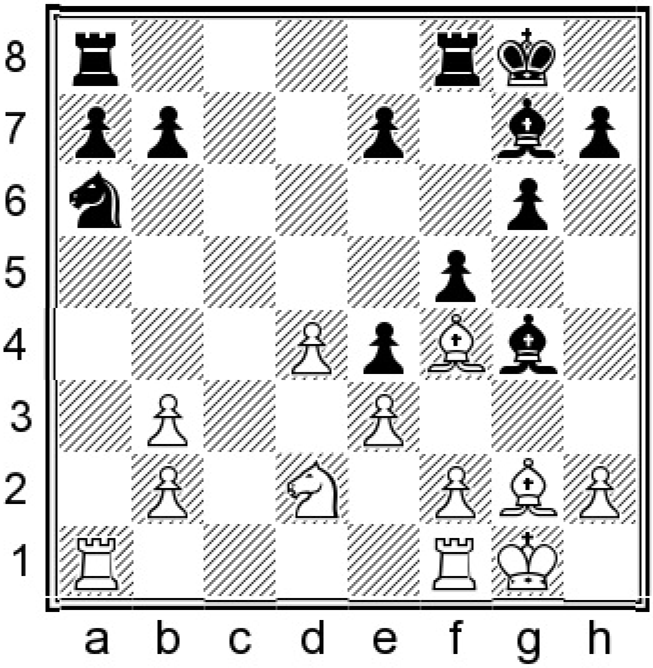
15...Bxg4

"Gelfand, being a principled player, of course reacts with the critical continuation, accepting the sacrifice." (Nielsen).

It was possible to play more quietly, 15...Nxd2 16.Nxd2, but then 16...Bd3?! is weak: White can simply play 17.Rfc1, improving his position, or can even sacrifice the exchange for a pawn with 17.Bxd5! and overwhelming compensation.

Black should instead play 16...Be6, and White has several plans available, e.g. 17.Ra5 followed by Rb5, while the natural occupation of the open c-file is also interesting: 17.Rfc1 Rfc8 18.Rc3, and it is possible to improve the position of the knight with 17.Nb1-c3.

16.Nxe4 dxe4 17.Nd2 f5



This is the first benefit White gets for the pawn sacrifice. This advance cuts off the retreat of the g4-bishop. In some cases in the Slav Defence the c8-bishop may end up too far from the queenside.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.f3!

The unprotected queenside can only be exploited if the g2-bishop becomes fully active.

18...e5?!

Black prefers to complicate the position, trying to stop the activation of White’s forces.

After 18...exf3 19.Nxf3 White plans Ne5 or Ng5, and almost all the white pieces will be attacking the queenside. 19...Nb4 here isn’t advisable, as after 20.Ne5 Bxe5 21.Bxe5 White’s bishops are too strong. General considerations must be supported by tactical calculations, which is not easy even for a supergrandmaster with limited time at the board.

What Black chose was a “human” move, looking for counterplay. It is easier for the engines, immune to tiredness and with no time trouble, to find tactical solutions in these types of situation.

By instead playing 19...Rad8! (a difficult move to trust at the board) Black seems to be close to equality, after e.g. 20.Ng5 Black reacts energetically, giving back material with 20...e5! 21.dxe5 Rfe8 22.Bxb7 Nb4, demonstrating active play and gaining equal chances.

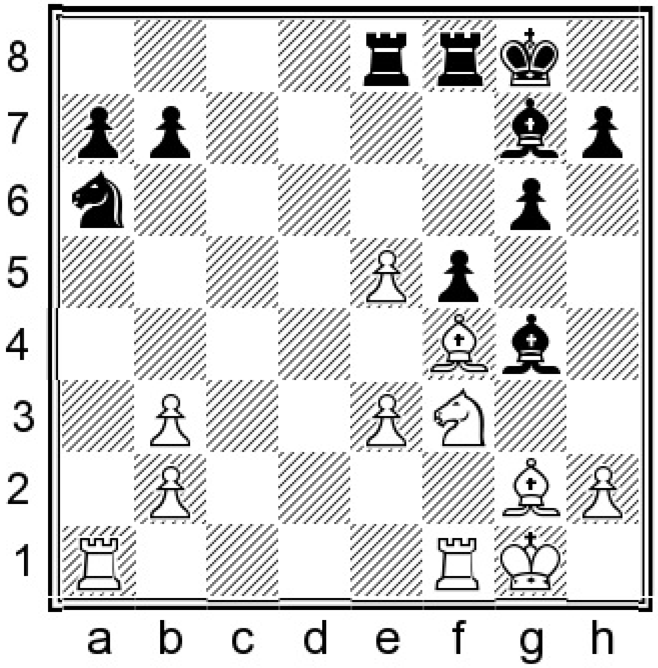
If the quieter 20.Ne5 then 20...Bxe5 21.Bxe5 Rd7, and although White has compensation for the pawn, Black's position is better compared to that obtained in the game.

19.dxe5 exf3 20.Nxf3 Rae8

The inactive rook is now in play.

In case of 20...Nc5?! White would play 21.Ng5!, preventing ...Ne6 and threatening 22.b4 followed by Bxb7.

20...Rfe8 wouldn't be entirely satisfactory either; there would follow 21.Nd4, threatening to take on b7, and if 21...Bxe5 then 22.Bxb7 attacking the a8-rook is winning.



Black has returned the pawn and his position looks fine. Gelfand ties the f3-knight to the defence of the e5-pawn, and the pressure of the white bishop pair is not felt on the queenside.

Exercise: How did Carlsen improve his chances?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.Ra5!

After 20...Rae8 the jump 21.Nd4 was not so strong, as after 21...Bxe5 22.Bxb7 Nb4 there is no longer a rook hanging on a8.

Carlsen defends the e5-pawn in the first place, to give more freedom to his knight, who can move to d4 or g5, “very much making it a tactical battle, and not a quiet positional game.” (Nielsen).

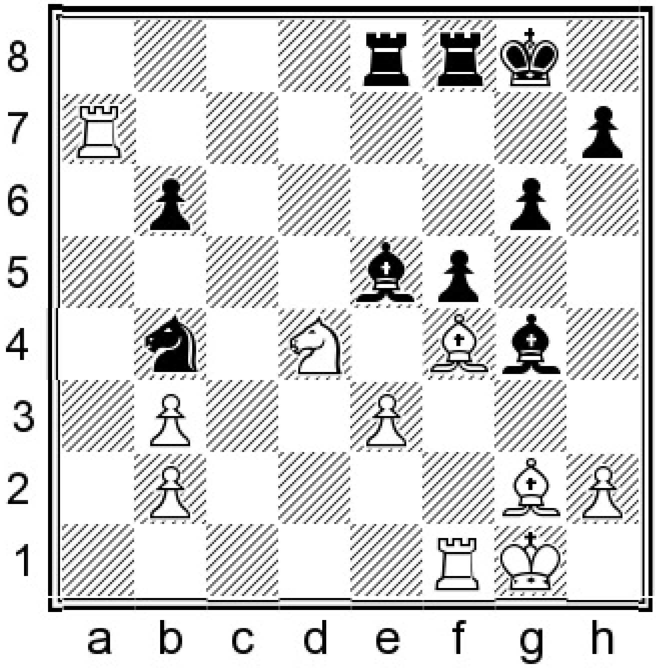
21...Nb4 22.Nd4

Activity first, instead of capturing pawns.

22...b6

Black also defends logically. The e5-pawn will be taken with all his pieces active and the b4-knight controlling the check on d5.

23.Rxa7 Bxe5



Exercise: How did Carlsen inject life into this position?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24.Bh6!

Above all keeping his dangerous bishop, this creates threats against the enemy king and diminishes the activity of the black pieces.

24...Rf6

It's awkward leaving g7 unprotected, but necessary, as if 24...Rf7 then 25.Ra4! Bd6 26.h3! (chasing the bishop away first, which is even better than 26.Rfa1! immediately) 26...Bh5 27.Rfa1! with strong threats such as Ra8, Bf1, etc.

25.h3!

Not an optically impressive move, it's true, but with deep significance.

There were alternatives, such as the logical 25.Rg7+! followed by 26.Rb7 threatening 27.Bg7+ and with the idea of bringing the other rook to a1 and a7.

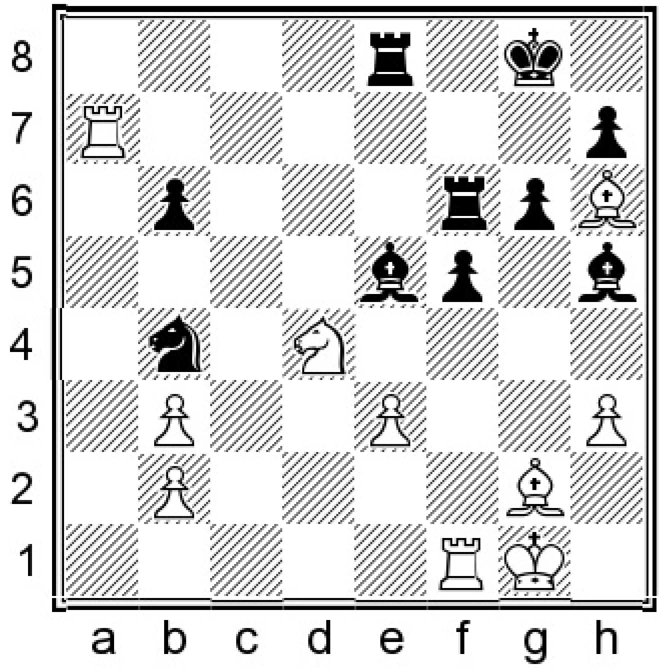
There was also a computer move, less logical for a human, 25.Ra4, retreating a well-placed piece, which was tactically supported: after 25...Bd6 26.Nb5 Bc5 27.Nc7 Rd8, then 28.Rxb4! Bxb4 29.Nd5 is strong. In this line the importance of the h6-bishop is evident.

But that is not a forced line after 25.Ra4, of course. Black should avoid playing this, for example 25...Bxd4 26.exd4 g5 with complications that are not clearly unfavourable for Black.

25...Bh5?!

"Hard to believe, but this retreat weakens f5!" as Nielsen wrote. We shall see very soon what he is talking about.

Knowing this natural move is not best, it is easier to look for other less obvious solutions. The most resistant seems to be 25...Bxd4! 26.exd4 Be2 27.Rc1 (or 27.Rfa1) 27...g5!. This is an important resource we already know. Now 28.Bxg5? Rg6 is wrong, so White should play 28.Rg7+ Kh8 29.Re7! instead. Black should defend his position here, playing 29...Rg8 30.Bxg5 Rxg5 31.Rc8+ Rg8 32.Rxg8+ Kxg8 33.Rxe2, after which Black would play ...Kf7 and ...Rd6, trying to build a fortress with drawing chances.



Exercise: Let’s ask, more as a joke than as a serious question, how Carlsen took advantage of the “weakness” created on f5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Nc2!!

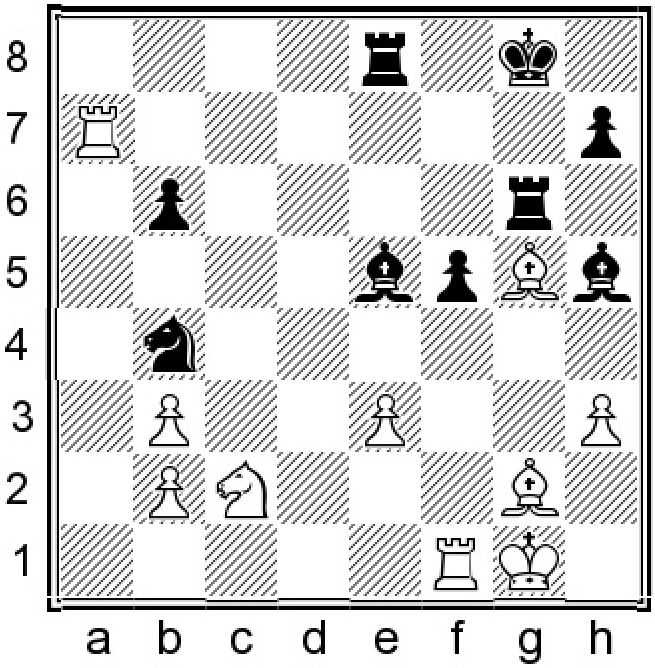
A beautiful deflecting move to gain access to the d5-square.

26...g5!

Black defends with a beautiful tactical move too, to divert the h6-bishop from the mating net.

Not 26...Nxc2? 27.Bd5+ Rfe6 (forced, if the king moves to h8 then 28.Bg7#) and 28.Rc1 wins the knight, leaving White with a material advantage, as 28...Nb4? leads to mate after 29.Bxe6+ Rxe6 30.Rc8+.

27.Bxg5 Rg6



The bishop must remain attacked to maintain the material balance, but now finally we can see the flaw of 25...Bh5.

Exercise (simple): What was Carlsen's idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28.Rxf5!

Giving a clear justification to 25.h3!

28...h6 29.Bxh6!

"Keeping true to the style of the game," as Nielsen says, although the insensitive engines show a prosaic solution: the modest 29.Nxb4! seems even better, after 29...Rxg5 30.Rxg5+ hxg5 31.Bd5+ Kf8 (if 31...Kh8 then a favourable bishop exchange follows: 32.Bf7! Bxf7 33.Rxf7 Bxb2 34.Nd5, followed by centralization of the king, winning) 32.Nc6 Bxb2 33.Kf2, with a pawn up and a dominant position.

29...Rxh6?!

After 29...Nxc2 30.Rxh5 the h6-bishop is protected, and after the coming 31.Rg5 all the problems with the pin disappear, with several extra pawns for White.

Nielsen showed the most stubborn defence: 29...Bf3!. After 30.Rg5 Rxg5 31.Bxg5 Bxg2 32.Nxb4 Bxh3 33.Nd5 White will retain a big advantage, but not as big as after 29.Nxb4.

The analysis Nielsen gave, supported by the engines of mid-2014, are not refuted by those of mid-2020. This is not that usual, as the new engines on most occasions find more hidden possibilities.

30.Nxb4 Bxb2 31.Nd5

White is two pawns up, with active pieces; he has a winning advantage, but it is still a fight.

31...Kh8 32.Rb7 Bd1 33.b4 Rg8 34.Ne7 Rd8

After 34...Rg7 White can reorganize his forces, playing 35.Rf2 Be5 36.Kf1, and the g2-bishop is free.

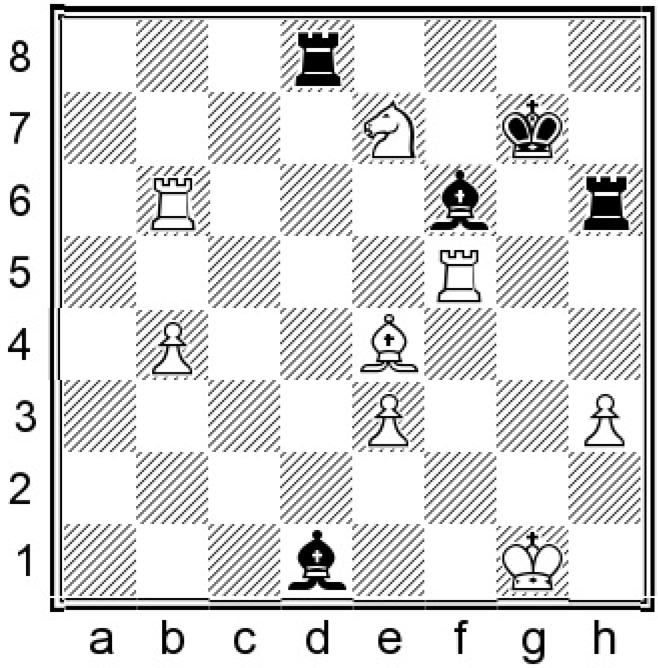
35.Be4!

The bishop helps to make Black’s king’s life harder.

35...Bf6

35...Rxh3 gets mate after 36.Ng6+ Kg8 37.Bd5+.

36.Rxb6! Kg7



Exercise (simple): Carlsen forced Gelfand to give up, how?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37.Rf2!

Threatening 38.Nf5+, and after 37...Bxe7 38.Rg2+! the h6-rook is lost thanks to the e4-bishop.

1–0

This is what Carlsen wrote about this game: “The first-round classical game against Gelfand today was exactly the kind of chess game I like to play. The queenless middlegame fight offered positional and tactical nuances on every move. It is hard to say where Gelfand went wrong, but after 15.g4! his position was quite tricky. I allowed my pawn structure to be totally busted, but as long as I could keep on putting pressure on him on every move, my advantage quickly became quite significant. By the time he got into time trouble the position was probably already winning for me. He resigned just before the first time control.”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) The beautiful sacrifice 15.g4!, among other virtues, forced 17...f5, helping to leave the g4-bishop out of play.

2.) Bishops need open diagonals, and 18.f3! activating the g2-bishop complemented 15.g4!

3.) Rooks need open files, and beginning with 21.Ra5! White was later able to penetrate the seventh rank.

4.) The king’s security is almost always a key factor of an open position, so any opportunity to weaken the opponent’s king’s defence must not be missed. (24.Bh6! 26.Nc2!)

5.) Even in bad positions it is possible to fight. (*29*...B*f3!*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 10
Magnus Carlsen – Radoslaw Wojtaszek
Sicilian Defence [B26]
Tromso Olympiad (4), 05.08.2014

1.e4 c5 2.Nc3

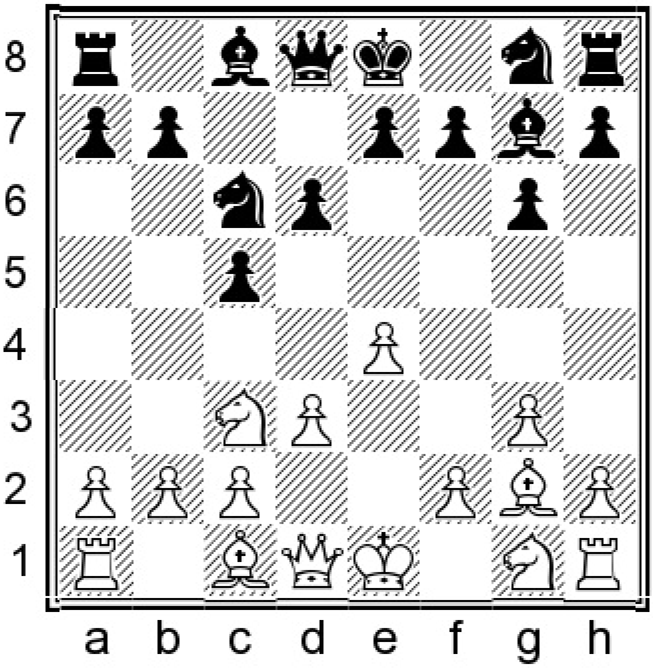
Question: This variation is rarely employed? Why did the World Champion choose it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This decision was taken considering factors away from the chessboard: The Closed Variation wasn’t usually part of Carlsen’s repertoire; he chose it in order to take the game to uncomfortable territory for his opponent.

It could be said that part of the victory in the game was based on this planning. Carlsen commented that Wojtaszek was Anand’s second for a long time (in other words, at that stage, when they had already played one match, Wojtaszek must have worked on Carlsen’s usual opening repertoire), that his strength was the opening and that he plays better in complicated positions, for which reason he decided to play a closed and not very theoretical position, “from move one, without computer analysis.”

2...d6 3.g3 Nc6 4.Bg2 g6 5.d3 Bg7



6.Be3

In this position another world champion, Boris Spassky, almost always used to play 6.f4 and after 6...e5 used to choose 7.Nh3.

6...e5

Black employs the setup popularised by Botvinnik.

7.Nh3

Now Carlsen emulates Spassky, who frequently used this move in the Closed Variation, even if, as we have seen, he did so without having yet decided the destination of the c1-bishop.

The knight is on h3, rather than e2 or f3, in order after a future f4 to be able to retake on f4 with the knight, aiming at the weak point in the black structure, d5.

From h3 it’s more active than on e2, because in some circumstances it can even move to g5, and also it doesn’t get in the way of the queen in the event of playing f5, i.e. if Black plays ...gxf5 the queen has direct access to h5.

These possibilities compensate for the obvious defect of placing a knight on the rim.

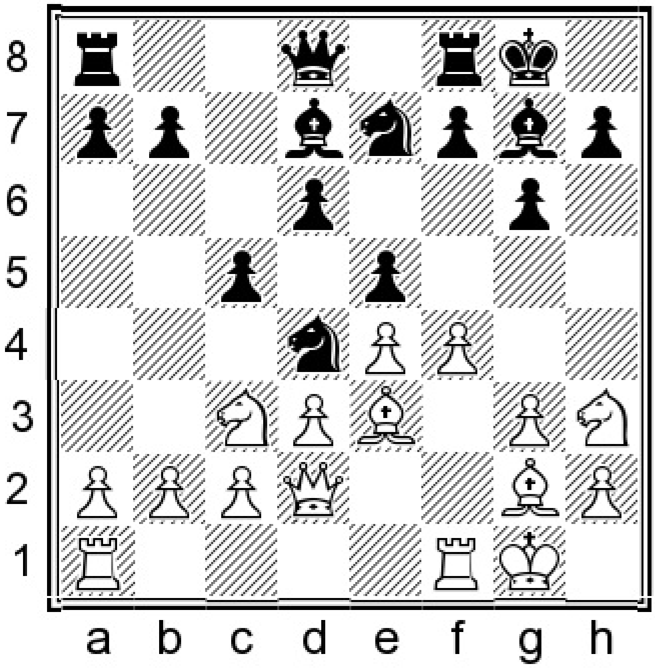
Another, more usual idea, is 7.Qd2.

7...Nge7 8.f4 Nd4

Increasing Black's control of f5, a sound move. After 8...0-0, as we discussed in the previous note, White has the possibility of sacrificing with 9.f5 gxf5 10.Qh5, showing a positive side to the deployment of the knight on h3, keeping the diagonal d1-h5 open. Carlsen commented in a video for chess24.com that he was not sure if this is better than the simple 9.0-0.

9.0-0 0-0 10.Qd2 Bd7

A more common idea is 10...Rb8, evading the X-ray pressure of the g2-bishop, thus enabling either the usual queenside expansion with ...b5–b4 or simple development with ...b6 and ...Bb7. In the event of White playing 11.Rf2, in order to double the rooks, a useful move is 11...f6! controlling g5 and preparing ...Be6. 10...f6 is also possible.



Exercise: What plan would you choose for White here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

11.Nd1!

This was one of the ideas of 10.Qd2. It's a normal plan in this line; the knight heads towards the kingside and enables White to expel the black knight from d4 with c3. Another of White's ideas, which is to connect the rooks, can’t be carried out here after 11.Rf2 f6, as 12.Raf1?! is answered with 12...Qc8!, when White is forced to sacrifice a pawn with 13.f5, for insufficient compensation in this case.

11...Qc8?!

This move is not especially useful and neither does it have an associated plan behind it. It seems to confirm as correct Carlsen’s comment that Black didn’t manage to find the correct way to continue in this phase of the game. It was possible to play 11...b6, when 12.f5?! is bad due to 12...gxf5 13.exf5 Ndxf5!, with more than enough compensation for the exchange.

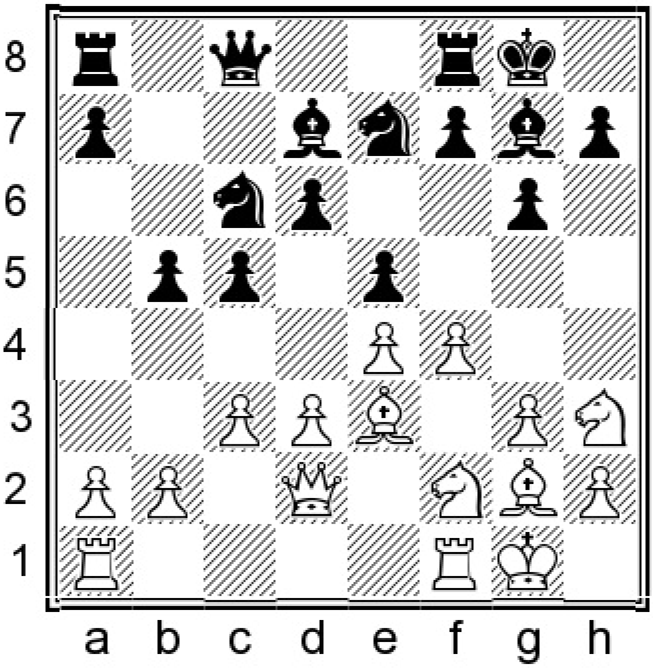
12.Ndf2

An unusual square for the knight, but there is nothing wrong with it, as it doesn’t change the character of the position.

12...Ndc6 13.c3 b5?!

The usual move in this type of position is 13...b6, ready to answer 14.fxe5 with 14...dxe5 without losing control of the centre and/or allowing Nf4.

This is what Carlsen recommended in the video. In that case he “definitely had to show a lot more ingenuity to create some play,” and added that he didn’t like 13...b5.



Exercise (easy): What did White play now?

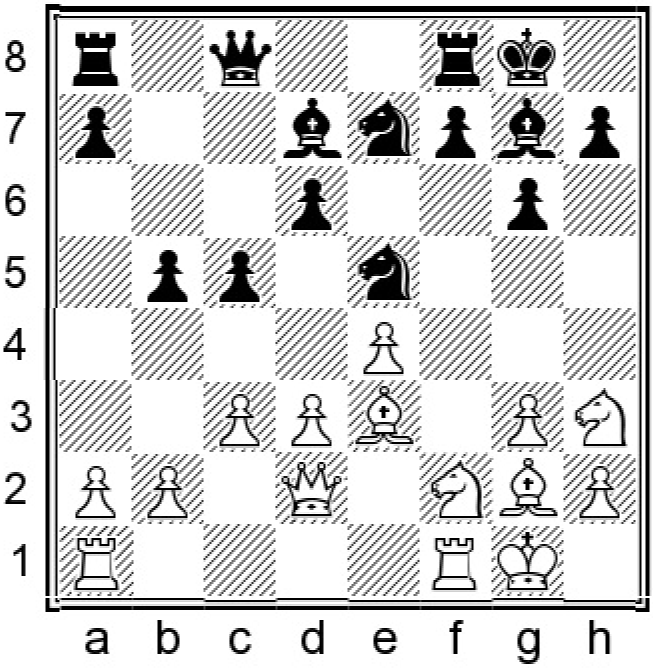
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.fxe5!

This way White gains a small victory: he has an extra pawn in the centre, which, after suitable preparation, will start marching forward by d4.

14...Nxe5



Exercise: How should he continue now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15.Bh6

Postponing Nf4, so as not to render this bishop temporarily inactive. After the exchange of Black's defensive bishop it is clear that the opponent's king will be one of White's targets in the future.

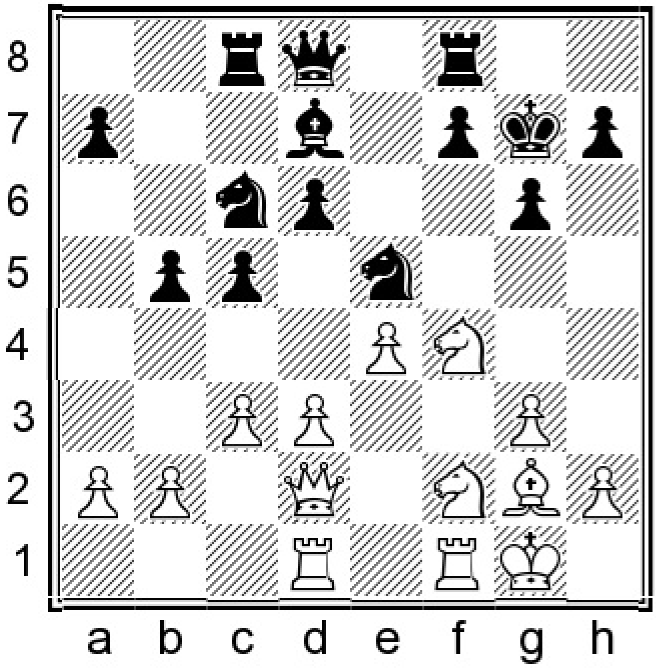
15...N7c6 16.Bxg7 Kxg7 17.Nf4

Carlsen said about his position that at this moment it doesn't seem impressive. The g2-bishop is not great, and Black has good control of the center for the moment, "but it is really hard for him to find a plan." And as we shall see, in the game "all flowed quite smoothly for White."

17...Qd8 18.Rad1

The engines prefer the manoeuvre Nd1–e3, ensuring the presence of a knight on d5 (after a possible ...Ne7 by the opponent), but the World Champion prefers to prepare d4, bringing his only inactive piece into battle.

18...Rc8



Exercise: What should he play now?

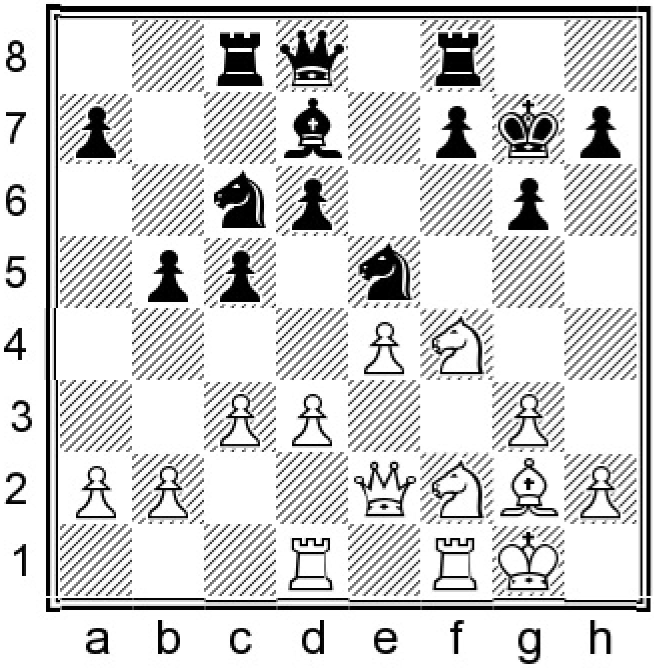
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.Qe2

Black can’t undertake anything active and, therefore, there’s no hurry. It’s possible to strengthen the position first. Carlsen makes another prophylactic move before playing d4; from e2 the Queen controls g4 and evades a possible attack from ...Nc4.

In the video Carlsen commented that another point of his move was to provoke what happens in the game.



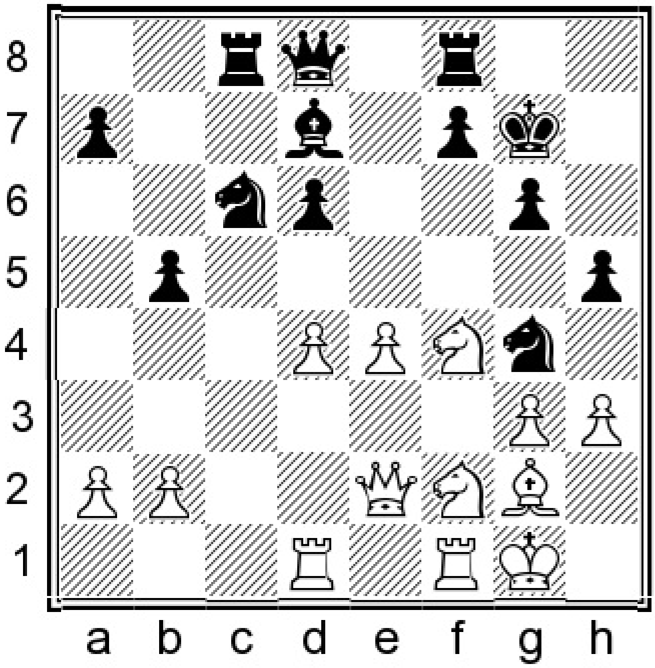
19...h5?

The idea is clear, to obtain g4 for the knight, but it’s obvious that the security of Black’s castled position will no longer be the same.

Nonetheless, it’s easy to criticize this move after seeing what happened, but it’s less easy to suggest a good alternative, because there seems to be nothing better than the sad retreat 19...Ne7, in order to make room for the e5-knight to withdraw.

20.d4 cxd4 21.cxd4 Ng4 22.h3

The following exchange is welcome for White because it assists the coordination of his remaining pieces, and in any case the f2 knight didn’t have a brilliant future.

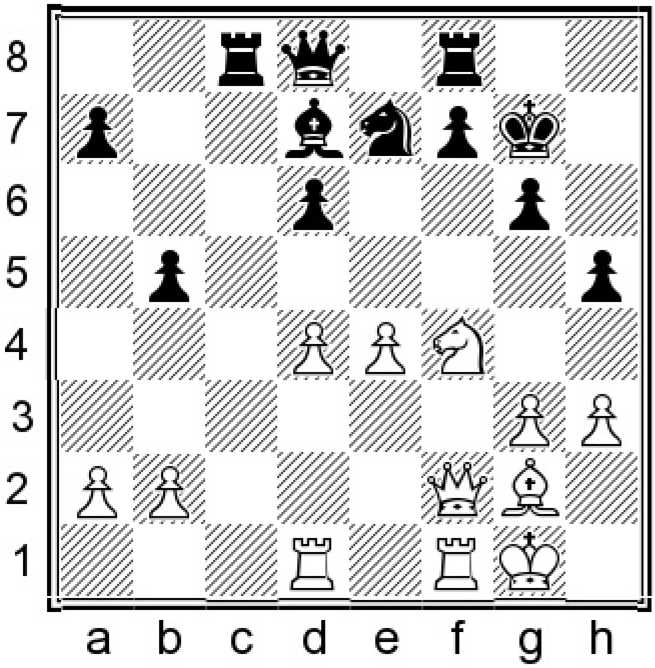


22...Nxf2 23.Qxf2

Carlsen said that the weakness created with 19...h5 turns out to be bigger than it looks. White's advantage is supported by his strong center, there are suddenly attacking chances through the f-file, and he has the jump Nd5 probably followed by Nf6 and Qf4-g5. White gets all this without sacrificing material.

23...Ne7

Deterring the f4-knight from jumping to d5.



Exercise: Which plan should he choose now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24.Rd3!

White's methodical concentration of forces continues; the rook heads for the f-file, increasing the pressure on the kingside.

For Carlsen this move was "fairly aesthetically pleasing."

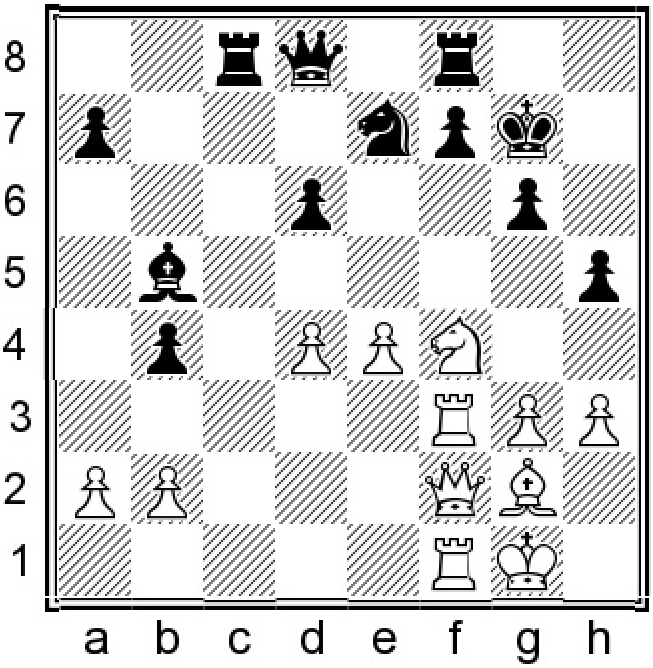
24...b4

In order to be able to play ...Bb5, but this will not be relevant.

25.Rf3 Qe8

Black can only wait.

Exercise: Why doesn't Black continue with the idea of chasing a rook from the f-file with 25...Bb5?

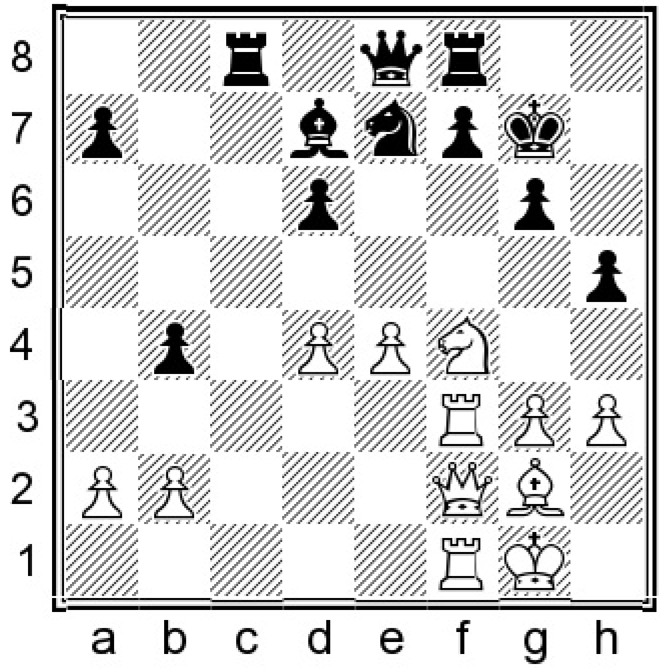


Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because the concentration of white forces on the kingside was already overwhelming.

There would have followed 26.Nxh5+! gxh5 27.Rxf7+, with a quick mate.

The prophylactic 25...Kg8 was more tenacious, but White's superiority would remain in no doubt. It would even be possible to respond as Carlsen did in the game.



Carlsen commented about this moment: "I saw that Garry came to look at the game. He was standing to the side for a minute, then I moved..."

Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.g4!

"And he went on his way smiling. I think that he too would have made that move," concluded Carlsen.

Now the defects of 19...h5? become evident.

Kasparov commented "...I was impressed by how he sharpened things up with the pawn sacrifice 26.g4!. I don't know what the computers think, but it was obviously the best move to put pressure on the opponent's fragile position."

Five years ago the engines liked 26.d5 (this was Carlsen's first idea), which threatens the a7-pawn and also the one on b4 after 27.Qd4+ and Qxb4; in the event of 26...a5 White has 27.Qb6, also winning a pawn, unless you prefer to continue attacking on the kingside with 27.Qd4+ Kg8 28.Qf6, or even with the more violent 28.g4.

The strongest engine at the beginning of 2019 liked Carlsen's idea even more, but preferred to play first 26.Qd2 and only after 26...a5 to play 27.g4!; of course, these are ‘computer moves’, and it’s very difficult to move the queen from f2 if there is no obvious reason.

It’s hard to know which is best; it’s a clear example of the divergence between the ‘human’ approach to chess and that of the computer.

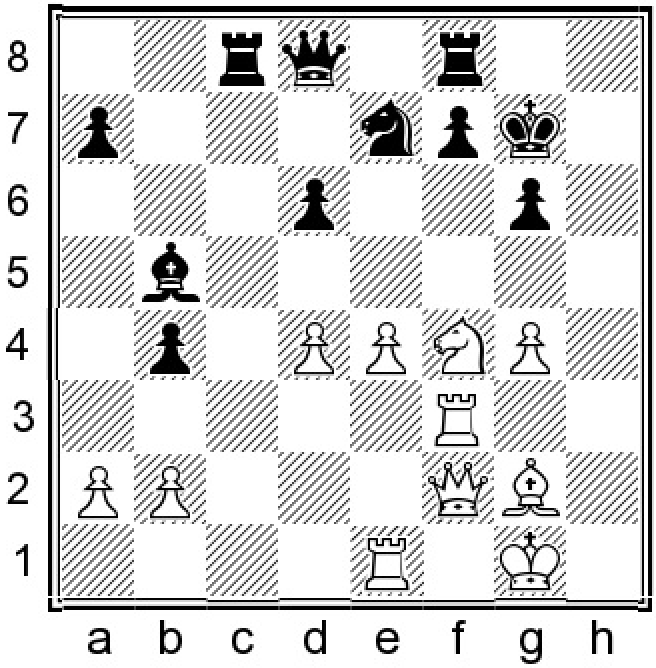
Carlsen said that his choice seemed so good to him that he didn’t look for alternatives. That’s the ‘human’ approach, taking the practical element into account. Nonetheless, we must add that one year later as I write this book, the strongest engines now prefer Carlsen’s choice.

26...hxg4 27.hxg4 Bb5

27...Bxg4 would be answered with 28.Rg3 Qd7 29.Bh3!, making good use of the semi-open g-file. 29...Bxh3 loses to 30.Nh5+! Kh6 31.Qf4+ Kh7 32.Nf6+.

29...f5 is also bad due to 30.d5, intending Ne6+ and/or Qd4.

28.Re1 Qd8



Exercise: How should he make progress now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.g5!

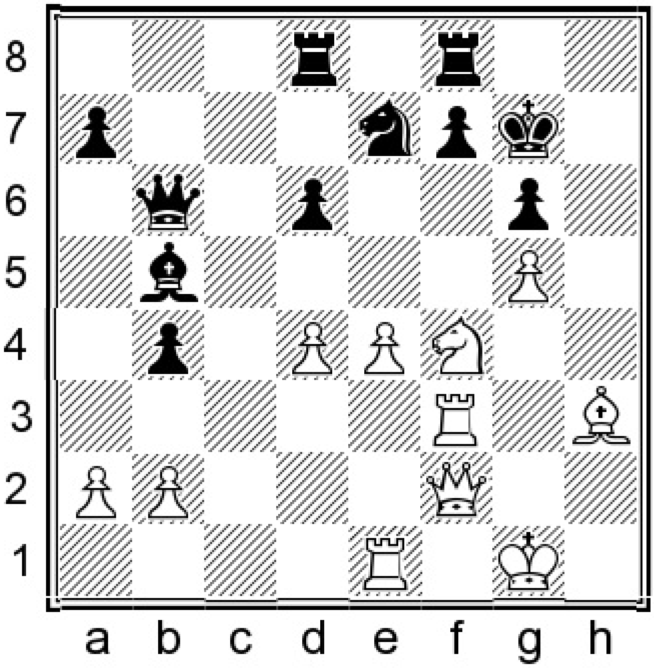
Once more activating an inactive piece. The idea is 30.Bh3, as well as to control f6, which is now accessible to White. Black has no useful move.

29...Qb6?!

Very slow, but by now it was terribly difficult to defend.

During the game Carlsen considered 29...Nc6, attacking his pawns. He would have simply answered 30.Rg3 and after 30...Qb6 31.Rd1, planning Nd5.

30.Bh3 Rcd8



Exercise: There are several strong moves now. What would you play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.Be6!

Carlsen chooses the most artistic move, and also the strongest. Pressure is increased along the f-file and the threat to invade along the h-file is strengthened by preventing a timely defence with ...Rh8.

31...Be8 32.Nd5

32.Rh3 was another possibility, the one preferred by the computers. If 32...Bd7 White wins with 33.Nh5+ gxh5 34.Qf6+ Kg8 35.Rxh5, while 32...Rh8 is refuted with for instance 33.Bxf7! (making way for the knight and subsequently the queen; 33.Nxg6! is another way) 33...Rxh3 (33...Bxf7 allows mate with 34.Ne6+ and Qf6) 34.Ne6+ Kh7 35.Nf8+ Kg7 36.Qf6+, mating.

“I don’t think Magnus even bothered to calculate. He simply looked for harmony,” commented

Carlsen’s first trainer, Simen Agdestein in *New In Chess* 2014/6.

32...Nxd5 33.Bxd5

And here Black resigned, powerless before the threat of 34.Rh3 followed by Qf6+ or Qh4.

1-0

Carlsen’s summary of the game was: “I simply tried to play some good chess. I soon felt that I had a comfortable position and that he didn’t really know what he was doing. In the opening yes, but afterwards no.”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Sometimes “normal” developing moves may be wrong if they are not linked to a plan. (10...Bd7? *10...*R*b8!* 11...Qc8? 13...b5?)

2.) Pay attention to moves containing several ideas. (11.Nd1!)

3.) Preventing the opponent’s plan can be as important as progressing with one’s own plan. (19.Qe2!)

4.) “Which piece to exchange?” “Which piece to retain?” – as we already know, these are questions that we need to keep asking ourselves; answering them appropriately can be of great help. (15.Bh6!)

5.) Any move that weakens your own kingside should be considered with extreme care. Sometimes the negative side is more important than the positive one. (19...h5? 26.g4!)

6.) “Chess is a team game”, i.e. all the pieces should work together. (24.Rd3! 25.Rf3!)

7.) A lesson mentioned by Carlsen himself is that a strong center may help to begin an attack without allowing strong counterplay and without the need to sacrifice much material.

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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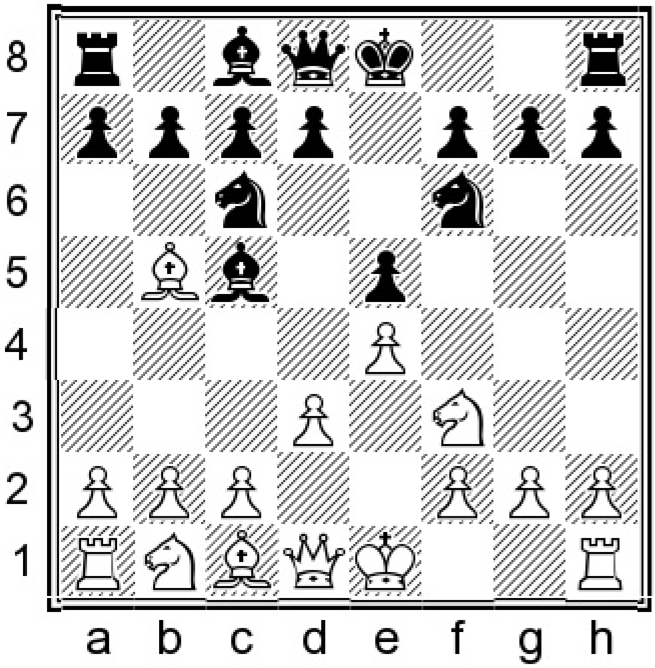
Game 11
Magnus Carlsen – Viswanathan Anand
Ruy Lopez [C65]
World Championship, Sochi (2), 09.11.2014

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6

Carlsen has to, in some way, “fight against himself”, because the Berlin Variation had been very helpful in his first world championship match. Although it was not a great surprise either, as both players had played the same variation with both colours in classical and rapid games.

4.d3 Bc5



This is the most popular answer to 4.d3. Black grabs the opportunity to develop his f8-bishop to an active position.

5.0-0

In the sixth game of the first match Anand preferred 5.c3 0-0 6.0-0, and after a long game full of manoeuvres they arrived at a rook ending, which superficially looked like Carlsen won it despite having no advantage.

In the seventh game of the same match Anand chose 5.Bxc6, without much success. Carlsen easily got a convenient draw.

Later, at the Gashimov Memorial 2015, playing with White against Kramnik, Carlsen played the plan 5.c3 0-0 6.0-0 d6 7.h3 Ne7 8.d4, occupying the centre. Later, he sacrificed a pawn, showing excellent preparation.

5...d6

5...0-0? loses the pawn without compensation after 6.Bxc6 and 7.Nxe5.

Black didn't want to "punish" 5.0-0 by playing 5...Nd4, which is the main alternative. Anand had defeated Carlsen at the Botvinnik Memorial 2011 (rapid) with that move, but not thanks to the opening. Carlsen got nothing on that occasion, but of course he would be very well prepared for this game. After 6.Nxd4 Bxd4 7.c3 Bb6 a "new" idea created some problems for Black in those days: the jump 8.Na3, to go to c4 or c2. That left the c1-h6 diagonal open for a timely Bg5, unlike when the knight is placed on d2.

6.Re1

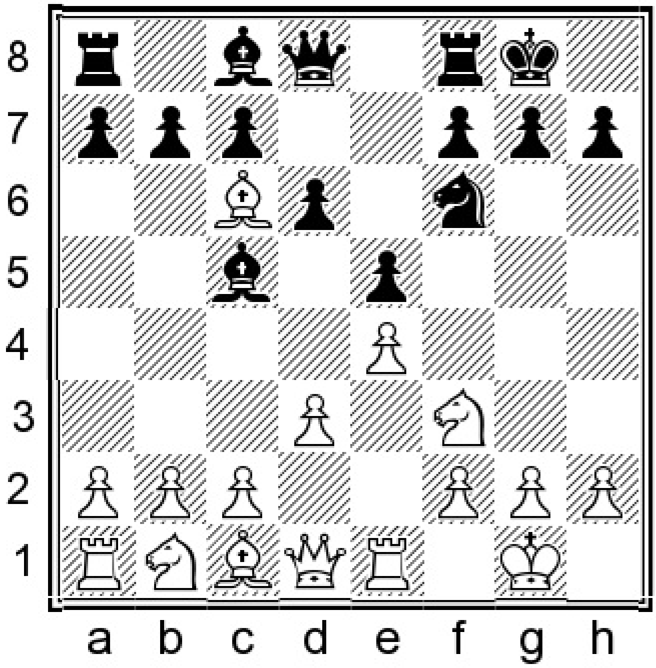
A novelty. One of the ideas is if White plays Be3 to retake with the rook after ...Bxe3.

In Wijk aan Zee 2015 Carlsen preferred 6.Nbd2 against Radjabov, winning a good game (Game 13 in this book).

6...0-0

After 6...Ng4 White is not forced to play 7.Rf1, and he would answer 7.Re2.

7.Bxc6



Question: Isn't it better to wait for ...a6 before playing this exchange?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The move doesn't count on a significant objective advantage. White wants to head for terrain that he knows better than his opponent. Considering the practical effect we can say that it was a success, with Anand now using more time for his moves than Carlsen.

One of the virtues of the exchange is to avoid a typical manoeuvre called the "Svidler Plan" by Anish Giri: it impedes ...Ne7-g6.

The most usual move is 7.c3.

7...bxc6 8.h3

If 8.Nbd2 then ...Ng4 and ...f5 is possible, so controlling g4 is useful, although now the manoeuvre ...Nh5-f4 makes more sense.

8...Re8

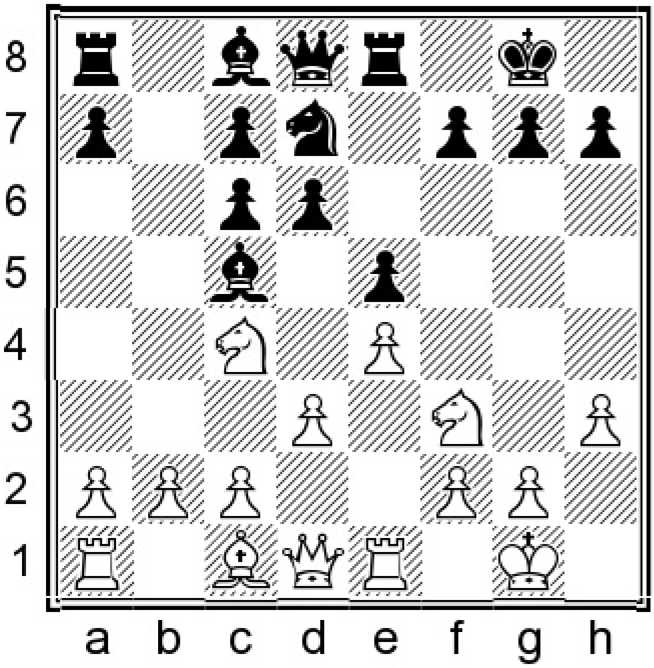
8...h6 involves a different idea, to continue 9...Nh7 and ...f5; the text move prepares a possible ...d5.

9.Nbd2 Nd7

There are no immediate threats so Black has several possible plans. Anand can now move his knight to f8, then to g6, the queen to f6, etc., aiming for active play on the kingside.

9...Nh5 was interesting too, not intending ...f5 anymore, but...Nf4 and ...Qf6, then White would probably react in the center by playing c3 and d4.

10.Nc4



Question: Is this better than the typical Spanish manoeuvre Nf1-g3?

Show/Hide Solution

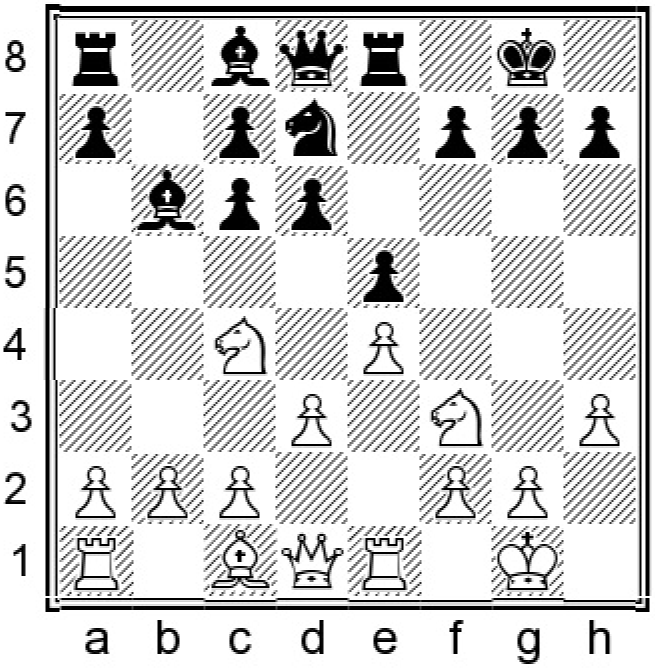
Answer: Carlsen didn’t see a future for the knight after Nf1-g3. By placing it on c4, he is preparing a future d4.

10...Bb6

Anand retreats his bishop before it is attacked with d4 to have more options, and at the same time avoids a possible Na5.

A different idea was 10...Nf8, followed by ...Be6 if it is possible, and not fearing 11.Na5, as Black has more than one good reply to it, including 11...Qd7 or even 11...Bd7, when 12.Nb7 isn’t advantageous due to 12...Bxf2+! 13.Kxf2 Qb8, regaining the piece thanks to the check on b6.

Carlsen would probably have played 11.c3 instead, and the battle would just be starting.



Exercise: We know the position is about equal, how did Carlsen try to improve his possibilities?

Show/Hide Solution

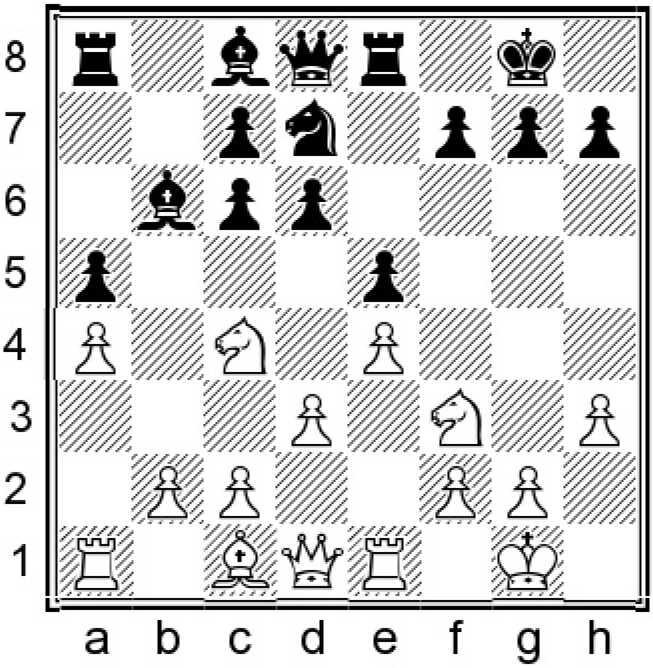
Answer:

11.a4!

A move played not only to chase the b6-bishop, as we shall see.

11...a5

Weeks later Carlsen mentioned the idea 11...f6, planning a later ...d5.



Exercise: What should he do now? If White doesn't do something concrete Black will play 12...Nf8-g6, without discarding the ...d5 idea, which is playable for example after 12.Bd2.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.Nxb6!

Exchanging the good knight seems a small concession, and apparently there was no urge, no intention to obtain an immediate advantage. However, it was motivated by something concrete with a further idea in mind.

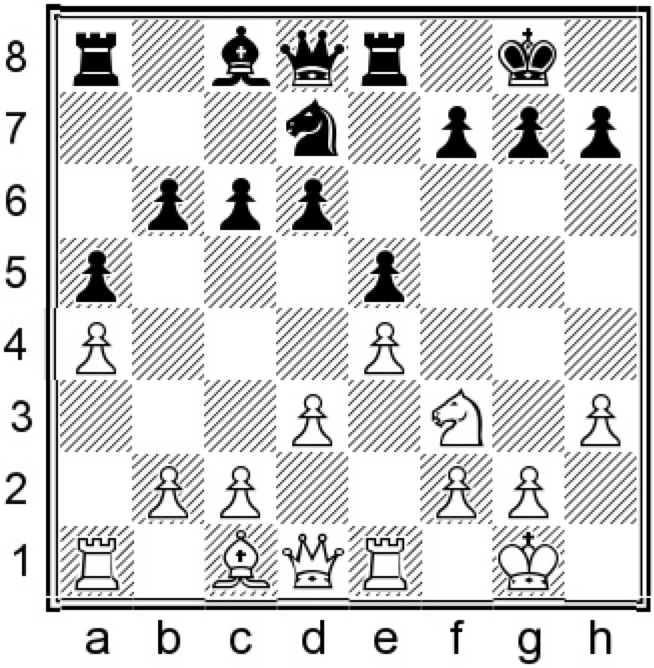
"I wasn't particularly thrilled about taking on b6, but I didn't see too many useful moves," was the explanation Carlsen gave.

12...cxb6

"Obviously ...cxb6 is very sound. Black should be OK," said Carlsen, and added: "Actually I thought even 12...Nxb6 wasn't too bad here, threatening ...f5."

After 12...Nxb6 the World Champion rejected 13.d4 exd4! 14.Nxd4 c5, or 14...Bd7, and "it's nothing special."

In case of 13.b3 then 13...f5 is possible, or he can also play quietly with 13...c5 14.Bd2 Nd7, planning ...Nb8–c6.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13.d4

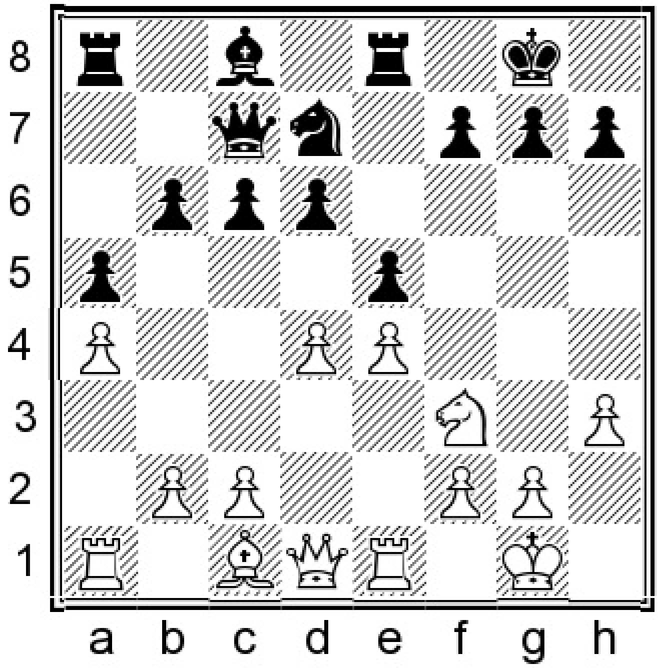
This was the reason to take on b6, and “something” is created: at least the game gains some tension.

13...Qc7

With the idea of playing ...Nf8, which is not possible yet because it loses a pawn after 14.dxe5.

Svidler proposed 13...c5, and this is what Carlsen suggested too. White would then play 14.d5, and Black will try to play ...f5.

Seeing what happened in the game we could also consider 13...Qe7, but it is difficult to play it because the queen would be a little far from the queenside.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Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

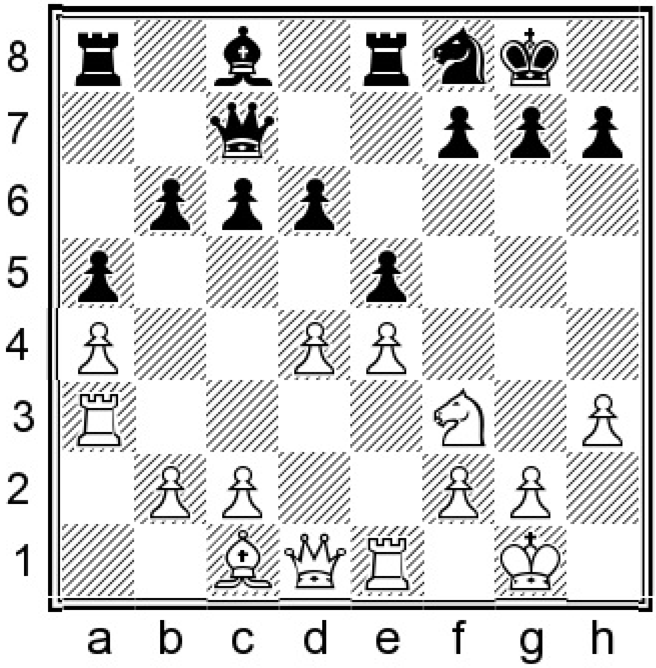
Answer:

14.Ra3!

This was other point of 11.a4!

14...Nf8

Heading to g6.



15.dxe5!

Question: Again, a move eliminating the tension? Why is this good?

Show/Hide Solution

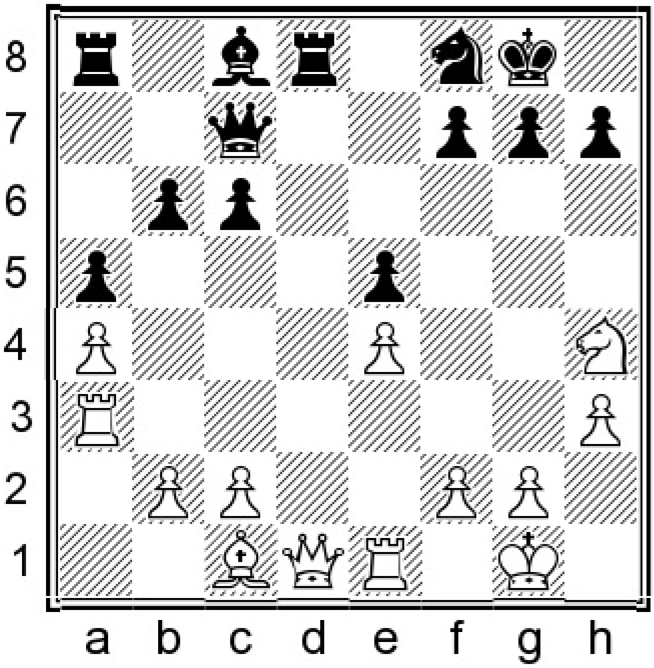
Answer: The motivation is also for a concrete reason. If White plays directly with 15.Nh4 then after 15...exd4 16.Qxd4 Qe7 17.Nf3 c5 18.Qd1 Bb7 19.Rae3 Rad8 Black would have all his pieces active and a good position.

15...dxe5 16.Nh4

At the right moment, with a stable center, White begins activity on the kingside. Carlsen considered he had a slight initiative.

16...Rd8

Black dominates the d-file as compensation. 16...Ng6 is not advisable due to 17.Nf5, as 17...Ne7 is answered by the unpleasant 18.Qd6!, when after 18...Qxd6 19.Nxd6 followed by Nc4 White wins a pawn.



Exercise (simple): How did White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

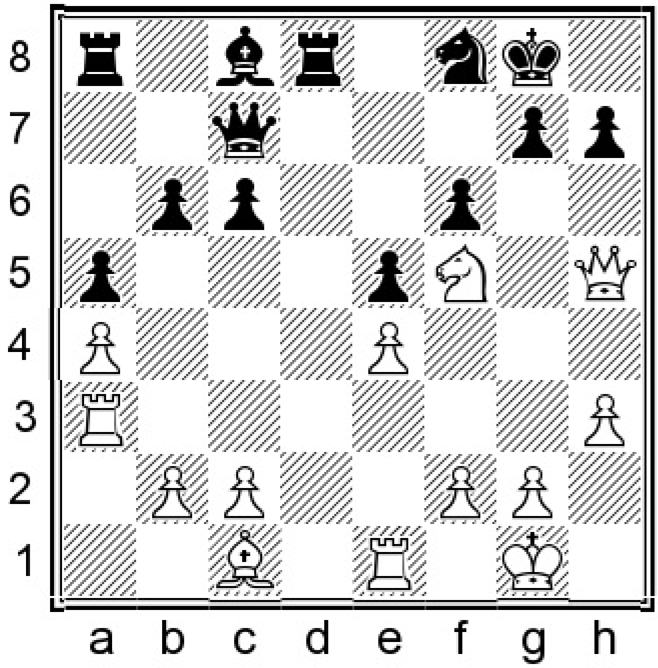
17.Qh5

Increasing the tension on the kingside. There was no better square.

17...f6 18.Nf5

More incisive than 18.Rg3, when Black can repel the aggression by playing 18...Qf7 19.Qf3 Ne6 20.Nf5 Kh8.

White's activity on the kingside is increasing and objectively Black's position can be defended rather easily. However, the task is more difficult if we add the practical side, because there are several wrong ways.



18...Be6?!

Question: Why is this logical move weak?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it is a natural move, but, although objectively this move is possible, from the practical point of view it is not the best, as White will be able to create problems and Black has to play carefully to keep the balance. In his video Carlsen mentioned 18...Ne6 19.Rg3 Kh8. This was reasonable, although the f5-knight will be safer than in the game.

Anand didn't want to play 18...Bxf5 yet, as after 19.exf5 White is somewhat better: the f8-knight has problems of mobility. However, he played that move later, in worse conditions, whereas after 19...Rd5 20.Rg3 Rad8 21.Bh6 R8d7 his position would be acceptable.

"Before that [18...Be6] it's an absolutely normal position," said Carlsen at the press conference after the game. 18...Qf7, aiming to get rid of the white queen, was even more natural and stronger.

Carlsen said that 18...Qf7 was the right decision: "We discussed briefly that ...Qf7 is more precise." "I miscalculated something at the end," was Anand's reason for rejecting it.

After 18...Qf7 19.Qe2 (19.Qg4 is also interesting) 19...Ne6! 20.Rg3 Kh8! "Black should be fine" (Carlsen).

The position would have been objectively equal, but naturally the fight would be very long.

19.Rg3

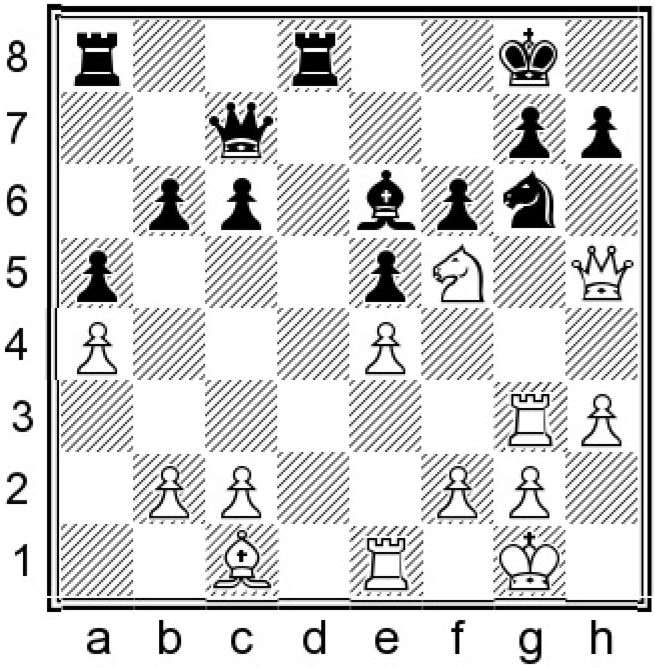
"There wasn't too much going on to be honest, but I felt I might have a slight initiative and then here after 19.Rg3 I was getting a bit more optimistic," said Carlsen.

19...Ng6

"If black has to play 19...Ng6 and go for this position then it's clear that something has gone pretty seriously wrong," commented Carlsen, and Anand said "To be honest there aren't any really easy choices. The position is a little unpleasant."

The clear drawback of the move is that now the attack h4-h5 is stronger.

If 19...Rd7 then 20.Bh6! would follow, and after 20...Ng6 then 21.h4! gxh6 22.Qxh6 would be possible, and there is no defence against h5.



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.h4!

Sure, we had a clue in the previous comment. Practical play and logical too. Carlsen explained "I thought 20.h4 was very good so I didn't look too much for other things."

The engines at first like the spectacular 20.Bh6, also briefly considered by Carlsen, but he didn't see a clear advantage after the main line 20...gxh6 21.Rxg6+ hxg6 22.Qxg6+ Kf8 23.Qxf6+ (not 23.Qxh6+? Ke8 24.Qxf6 Bxf5 25.exf5, and for example after 25...Qd6 any result is possible) 23...Qf7. Further, the engines don't see more than equality here and so switch to preferring 20.h4, which is also the "human move."

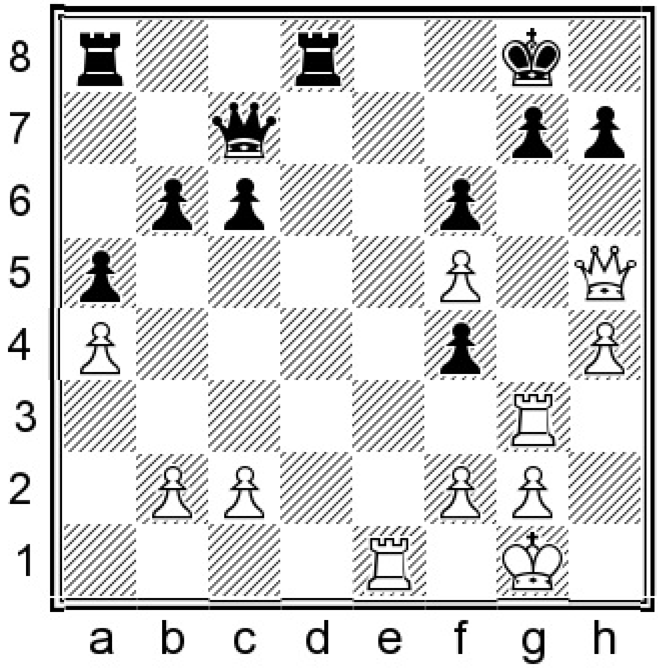
20...Bxf5

20...Qf7? loses to 21.Bh6

What Anand played was highly criticized by many people supported by what the computer saw. The engines suggest the unobvious defence 20...Kh8!, one important point being that after 21.Rxg6 the surprising 21...Qf7! follows. That position is still very complicated but Black seems to hold, e.g. 22.Nxg7 Qxg6 23.Qxg6 hxg6 24.Nxe6 Rd6!, and the knight has no retreat. 25.Nc7 Rc8 26.Na6 Ra8 27.Nc7 would follow. Another possibility is 22.Bh6.

Instead of 21.Rxg6 White would probably continue with 21.Qf3 or 21.Qg4, maintaining the tension.

21.exf5 Nf4 22.Bxf4 exf4



Exercise: What did Carlsen play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23.Rc3!

“Transforming the advantage”: after the exchanges White’s attack has disappeared, but Black has problems with his back-rank, which means problems with his king, and he also has pawn weaknesses on the queenside.

Carlsen mentioned the idea 23.Ra3 followed by Raa1, with an idea we shall see later. However, this is very difficult to find at the board, and he also said that what he played was more logical.

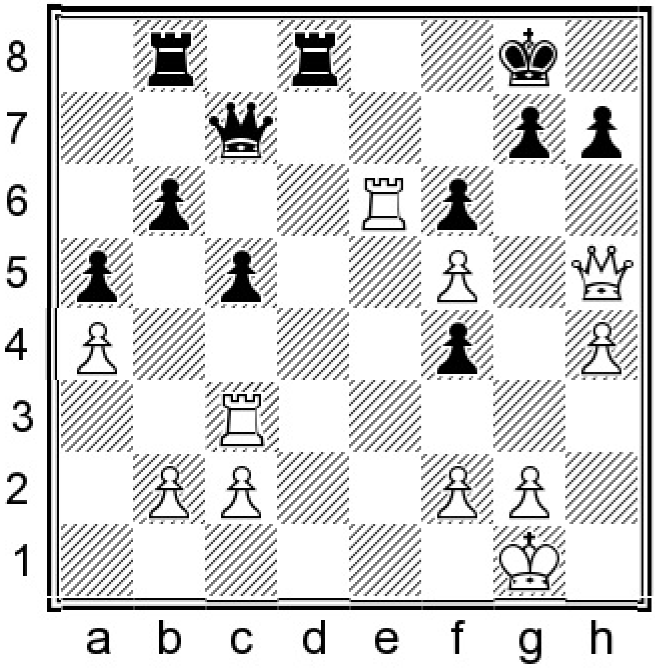
23...c5 24.Re6

Black’s queen has become even more passive.

24...Rab8?

Defending the b6-pawn to give freedom to his queen, and also with the idea of a later ...b5 if necessary, to obtain counterchances.

But this move gives White a free hand. Both players indicated that 24...h6! was called for, as the luft allows Black to play 25...Rd4. After for example 25.Qf3 Rac8 (or 25...Rab8, in better conditions than in the game, as we shall see) 26.Rc4 Rd4 27.c3! Rxc4 28.Qd5 Kh7 29.Qxc4 Rd8 White is better, but there is nothing serious yet.



Exercise: “In the end ...Rab8 was just a blunder,” was what Anand commented, why?

Show/Hide Solution

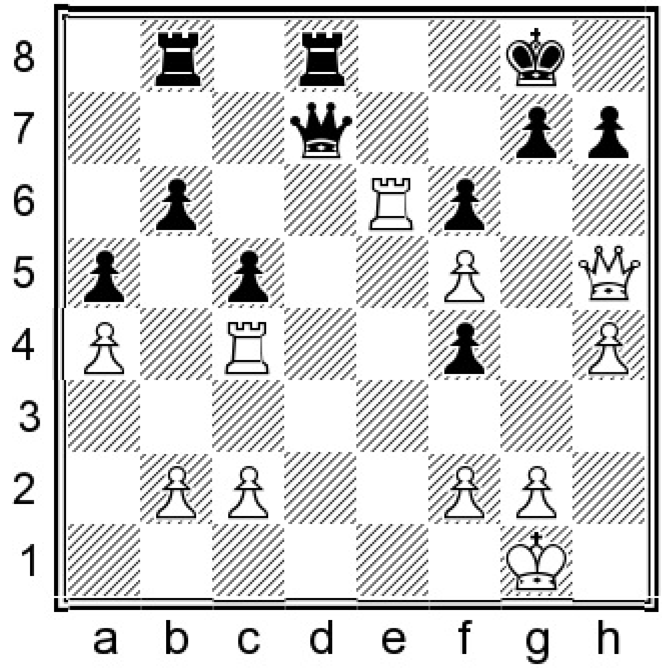
Answer:

25.Rc4!

At the press conference both players agreed that White’s Rc4-e4 manoeuvre should not have been allowed. This could be avoided by playing 24...h6!. Whereas 25...Rd4?? is of course now answered by mate, so Black must allow White’s second rook to connect with the other.

Going back, that was the idea of 23.Rc3, to double rooks on the e-file. We must note that 24.Rc4 to double rooks was less strong due to 24...Qf7, and after 25.Qxf7+ Kxf7 26.Rxf4 Carlsen mentioned 26...Rd4 as giving Black enough counterplay for the pawn.

25...Qd7



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Kh2

Obviously avoiding the exchange of queens with ...Qd1+.

26...Rf8

Now 26...Qd1? loses to 27.Re8+!, while 26...Re8 27.Rce4 Rxe6 28.fxe6 would also be very unpleasant.

27.Rce4

“Here I thought I should be much better, near to winning” (Carlsen).

27...Rb7

Both players were in time trouble. Carlsen was trying to consolidate his advantage without taking unnecessary risks, while Anand was looking for active continuations to change the “normal” development of the fight, which was turning very unfavourable for him.

28.Qe2 b5 29.b3

“I sort of missed 28...b5. I thought I could play 29.Re7 here but that doesn’t work due to 29...Qd6,” commented Carlsen after the game.

With more time at his disposal he would surely have seen he could play strongly with 30.f3! in this line, stopping the tricks based on ...f3, and White’s advantage would be winning after 30...Rxe7 31.Rxe7 bxa4 32.Qe4! (threatening Qb7). Sometimes “long moves”, as Botvinnik called moves like this, are hard to see in advance. If 32...Qb8 then 33.Qxa4, while 32...Kh8 33.Re8 threatens to win with 34.Qd3!, exploiting the overworked queen, and after 33...g6 34.Re7 Rb8 White wins with 35.Ra7.

29...bxa4 30.bxa4

30.Rxa4 was seen as “more natural”, trying to exploit the weakness of Black’s queenside pawns, but Carlsen had a different opinion, as he explained at the press conference.

“I just thought I have a very nice construction on the e-file and I should not break it up by moving the rook away. Maybe that was wrong but it felt more natural to take with the pawn. Maybe 30.Rxa4 works as well,” said Carlsen, adding he was worried about 30...Rb4 and ...f3 to follow if 31.Rxa5.

“I don’t necessarily agree that 30.Rxa4 is a more natural move, to me 30.bxa4 is at least as natural.”

30...Rb4

After the exchange of rooks, the pressure is softened, but the back ranks are also weakened.

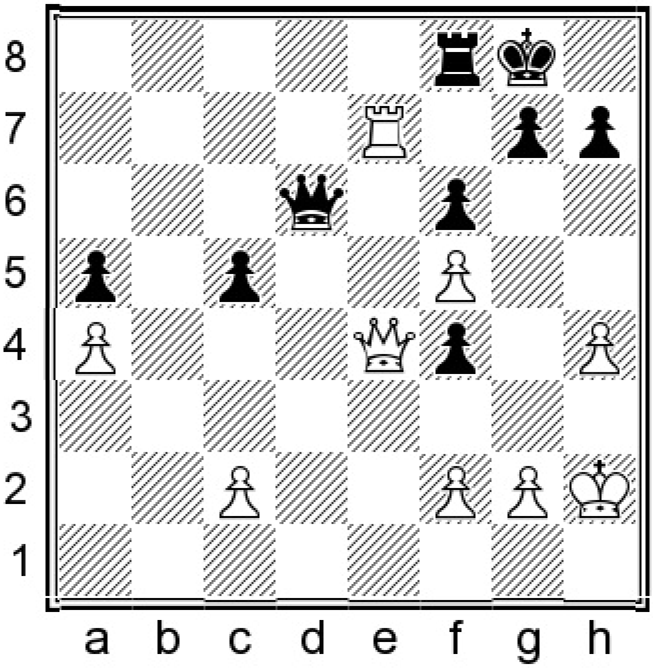
31.Re7

31.c4 was also attractive, without allowing the exchange. Then 31...Qxa4? fails to 32.Re7, but the modest 31...Rbb8 would be more difficult to break, and the a4-pawn is a weakness.

31...Qd6

With the obvious threat 32...f3+.

Exercise: 31...Rxe4 32.Qxe4 Qd6 didn’t work, why?



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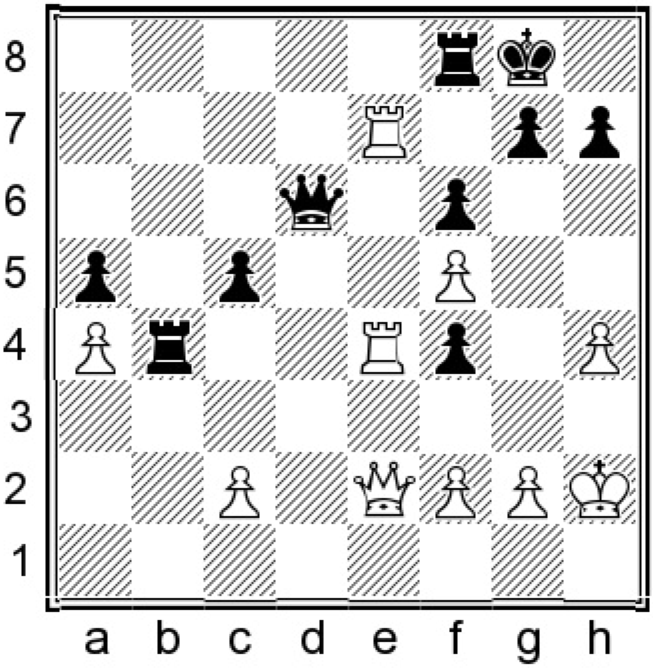
Answer: Due to 33.Qb7!



Exercise: What is the most accurate move now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

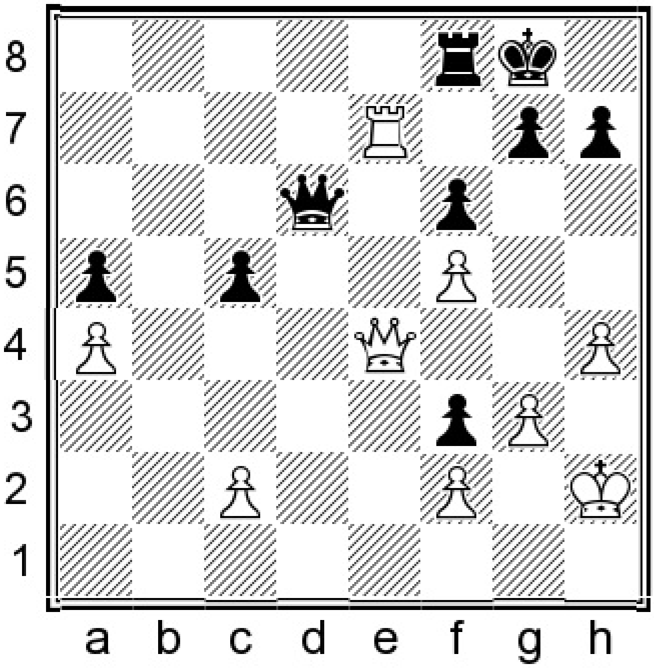
32.Qf3?!

Carlsen was short of time, as we know, so he plays cautiously. As we shall see this is not the most effective move. 32.f3!, cementing the kingside, would have finished all counterplay.

32...Rxe4! 33.Qxe4

“Here the position is still very difficult for Black,” was Carlsen’s evaluation, which is hard to dispute from the practical point of view, although with the help of an engine we can always find tactical resources.

33...f3+ 34.g3



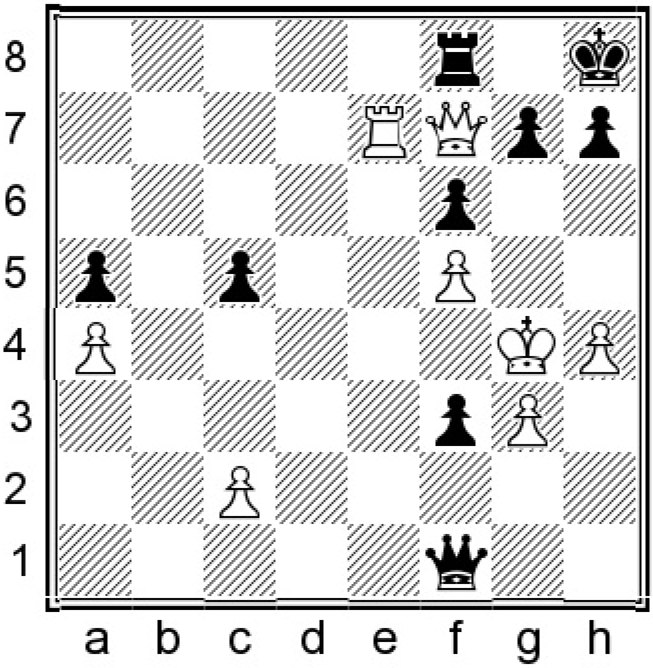
34...h5?

Now it is over. Carlsen commented after the game: “Obviously he could try something else but I think it’s still very difficult. Maybe I missed something better earlier on but the position is still very bad for Black.”

34...Kh8 was not a good defence due to 35.Re8 Kg8 36.Qc4+ Kh8 37.Qf7!

A more tenacious move was 34...Qd2!, pointed out immediately by the engines. It doesn’t look great at first sight because of 35.Qc4+ Kh8 36.Qxc5, but the f3-pawn gives counterplay, for example 36...Rg8 (36...h6 is also possible) 37.c3 h6, and, after improving the situation of his king, Black is ready to counterattack, e.g. 38.Qd4 Qc2 39.g4 Kh7 40.Kg3 Qc1!, etc.

35.Qe6+ seems to be the critical continuation. It looks winning, so many people thought that Black rejected activating his queen with 34...Qd2! due to this check: after 35...Kh8 36.Qf7 Qxf2+ 37.Kh3 Qf1+ 38.Kg4 the game seems over.



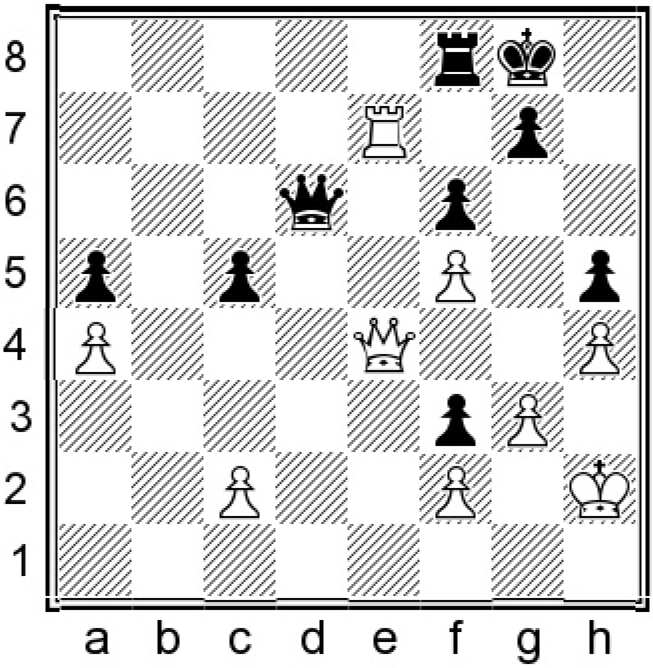
Exercise: Show "there is always a defence": what is the saving resource?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black has the amazing defence 38...h5+!! 39.Qxh5+ Kg8 40.Qg6 Qc4+ 41.Kxf3, and now 41...Qf1+! gets a draw by perpetual check, while after 41.Kh5 the g7-pawn is defended by 41...Rf7!, without fearing 42.Re8+ Rf8.

Of course, calculating this line precisely with its numerous variations with no time to think was an almost impossible task.

After 34...Qd2 Carlsen would probably have played 35.Qxf3 Qxc2 36.Kg2, and the fight would have continued with better chances for White.



Exercise (simple): Which is the decisive blow Carlsen played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

35.Qb7!

1–0

Carlsen didn’t gain any advantage in the opening, but he was not unsatisfied. He liked the kind of position they arrived at, equal but with possibilities to fight, and he said that that was enough for him.

Carlsen created activity in the game with his 11th and 14th moves and with a surprising simplification on move 12.

He outplayed the challenger in the middlegame. It was a complex battle, with lots of time consumed, so mistakes in time trouble were unavoidable. After that, it was Carlsen “who committed the next-to-last mistake” (as Tartakower would have said).

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Remember multi-purpose moves. (11.a4! 23.Rc3!)

2.) It is always useful to ask oneself “Which piece should I exchange?” and “Which piece should I keep?”. (12.Nxb6! 26.Kh2!)

3.) Preventing the opponent’s activity can be as important as activating one’s own forces. (*24...h6!* 26.Kh2!)

4.) We should remember and try to detect “long moves”. (*33.*Q*b7!* 35.Qb7!)

5.) Even in bad positions there are practical chances. (*34*...Q*d2!*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

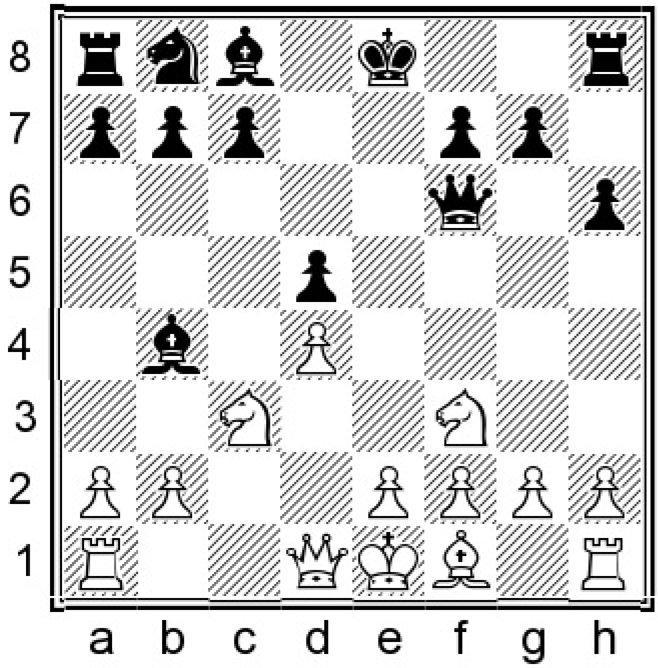
Game 12
Magnus Carlsen – Levon Aronian
Queen's Gambit [D38]

Wijk aan Zee (5), 15.01.2015

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 d5 4.Nc3 Bb4

Carlsen commented in a video for chess.com, three months after the game, that he and Aronian had played a lot of Queen's Gambits with both colours, including this Ragozin variation. He chose a quiet line this time.

5.cxd5 exd5 6.Bg5 h6 7.Bxf6 Qxf6



Exercise: We are in a well-known position, so what is the justification for the last two white moves?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

8.Qa4+

This is the idea, Black is obliged to leave his c7-pawn blocked for several moves, without the chance of playing a quick ...c5.

8...Nc6 9.e3 0-0 10.Be2 Be6 11.0-0 a6 12.Rfc1

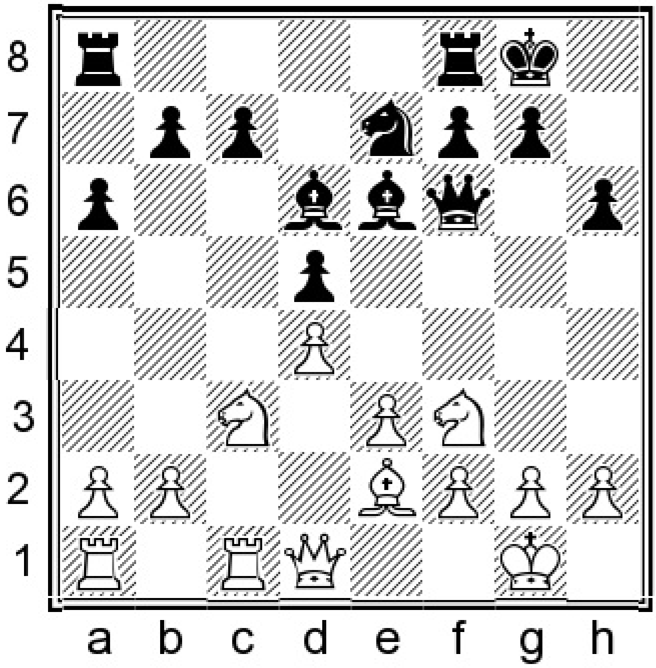
Question: I cannot clearly see what White gets for ceding the bishop pair.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The World Champion commented that this is an interesting type of position. Black seems to be fine because he has the bishop pair and his pieces are developed normally.

He thought that Black was indeed fine. Black's position seems easier to improve. It looks like Black should try to fight for the initiative on the kingside, because his bishop will move to d6 and his queen is already on the kingside. "But it should not be so easy: White has a solid position."

12...Bd6 13.Qd1 Ne7



Exercise: The situation is just how Carlsen described it, so how did he continue?

Show/Hide Solution

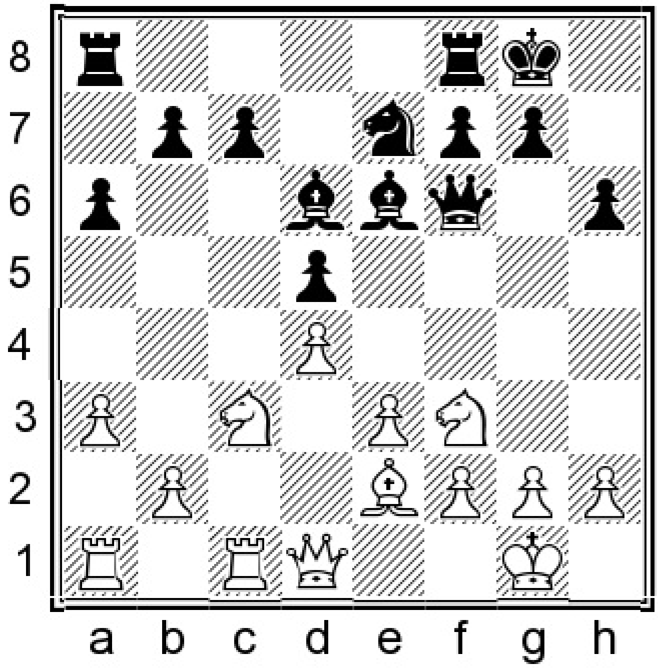
Answer:

14.a3

We are starting a race between White's attack on the queenside and a black offensive on the kingside. White will try to progress with b4 and, if possible, then b5. If Black then plays...axb5, after Nxb5 he will be worse.

The d6-bishop is a very important piece for Black. It is needed for his chances on the kingside and it is also vital to defend the c7-pawn and control e5, as we shall soon see.

14.Na4 has also been played, and we shall talk about it later.



14...Rfd8

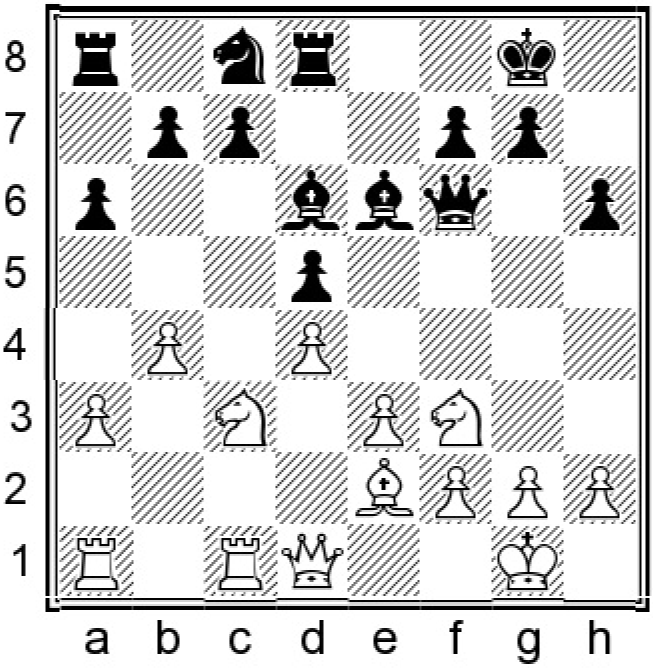
At the press conference after the game Carlsen wasn’t keen about this move, “not the most natural” was his conclusion. He also said that Black was beginning to play several second-best moves, and that Black’s position had started to deteriorate. Black is preparing ...c5. The immediate 14...c5 is possible, but the position is rather awkward for Black after 15.dxc5 Bxc5 16.Nxd5 Bxd5 17.Rxc5, even after recovering his pawn with 17...Qxb2, due to 18.Rc2 followed by Qd4.

Carlsen also commented that a few weeks later in Baden-Baden, in the same position, Anand, with the black pieces against none other than Aronian, employed a different plan: 14...g5 followed by ...Ng6, ...Qg7 and ...f5, obtaining counterchances on the kingside. That was probably a more promising plan.

15.b4

As planned, and also forced, because if Black succeeds in playing ...c5 in good conditions his position would be great.

15...Nc8



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

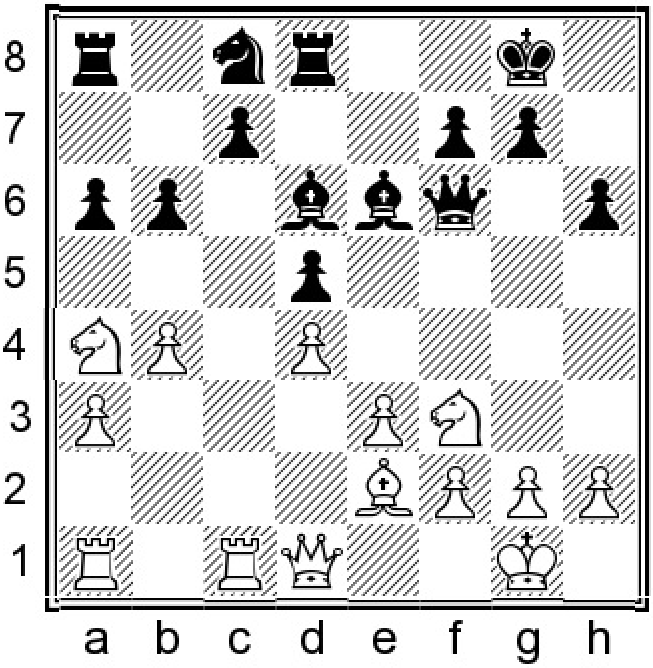
16.Na4

Fighting against Black's idea, which was to play 16...Nb6 and try to install the knight on c4, a square weakened after 15.b4.

16...b6

After 16...Nb6 White would not take on b6, because even if White would be virtually a pawn up, it wouldn't be clear how to continue. Instead, he would play 17.Nc5!

Carlsen suggested 16...b5, and if 17.Nc5 the b-pawn would not be attacked so Black could play 17...Nb6. Aronian didn't play it because he disliked 18.Nd2 Nc4 19.Ndb3 followed by a4, and White's chances are somewhat better, but maybe this was better than what he chose.



Exercise: What did Carlsen play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.Nb2

Improving the knight's prospects, as it heads to d3.

17...Ne7 18.Nd3

A multi-purpose move. He plans to play Nfe5 at some moment, probably followed by f4 and Bg4, and, as the b4-pawn is now defended, he can also play a4 followed by a5 if allowed. At the press conference after the game Carlsen added that "now he can never play ...c5," and remarked "This structure has been studied and Black always has problems with the c7-pawn, while on the kingside it is hard for him to come up with counterplay without creating weaknesses."

18...Ng6

Forced, as he needs to have three pieces covering e5 to avoid Nfe5 "which would be unpleasant for him" (Carlsen).

19.a4 a5

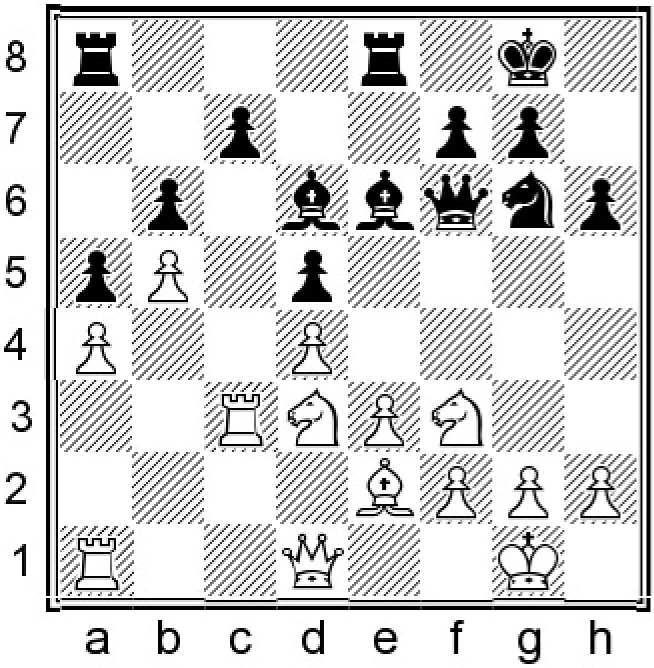
Aronian prefers to close the queenside, preventing the advance a5 which would probably force ...b5, ceding control of the c5-square, in a much worse situation than before: the black knight would never arrive at c4, as Carlsen pointed out later.

20.b5

Black’s position is not nice, as White can manoeuvre without difficulty while Black can only wait. Carlsen highlighted the importance of the d6-bishop to hold Black’s position.

20...Re8 21.Rc3

To double rooks on the c-file and raise pressure on the backward c7-pawn.



Question: But the pawn is well defended by the bishop, so is that pressure really helpful for White?

Show/Hide Solution

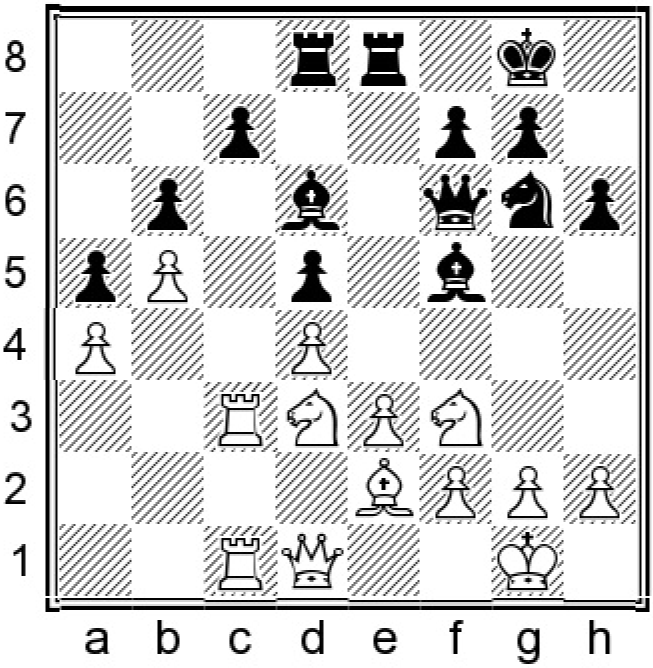
Answer: The pressure is helpful, as it ties the bishop to defence, and the pressure will not stop there. White can make more progress and tactical motifs will appear later.

21...Bf5

Carlsen was expecting ...Re7 now or on the next move, followed by ...Rae8. The pressure of the rooks on the e-file would not contain serious threats but they would be better situated for defensive purposes.

22.Rac1 Rad8

22...Re7 now definitely looks better.



Exercise: The pressure on the c7-pawn alone is not enough, so White should get something more. How?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23.Nd2!

“I needed to be careful,” said Carlsen. He wanted to play g3, blunting the d6-bishop and also improving the prospects of his bishop with Bf1–g2 or Bf3 ideas, but looking at the tactical motifs that could arise: “my opponent also has play.”

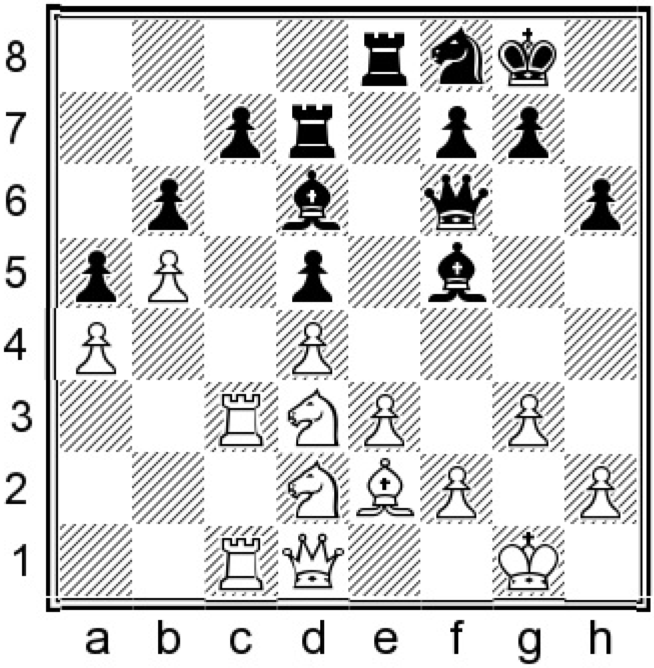
If 23.g3 immediately then 23...Bg4 is rather unpleasant, because 24.Nd2? is refuted by 24...Bxe2 25.Qxe2 Qxd4!

23...Rd7 24.g3

Now there is no impediment, and the d6-bishop cannot make any threats.

24...Nf8

Trying to improve his prospects now that the f3-knight has moved and the e5-square doesn’t need protection.



Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played now?

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Answer:

25.Bg4

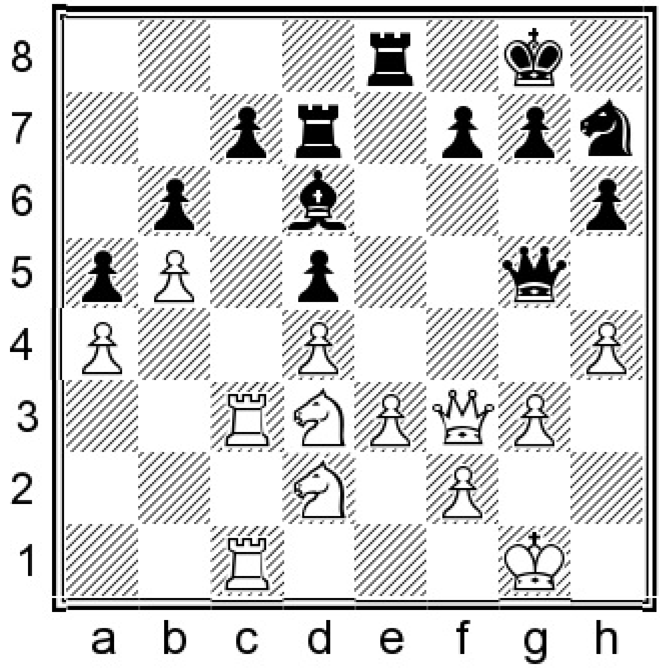
"With every exchange my position improves" (Carlsen). The exchange of bishops is good for White. It is true that Black gets rid of his "bad bishop", but the d5-pawn loses its protection too, and also the c6-square is available for White.

Going back, 24.Bg4 was also possible.

25...Nh7 26.Bxf5 Qxf5 27.Qf3! Qg5

Again, the exchange is not acceptable for Black, as after 27...Qxf3 28.Nxf3 Black will have to wait without any prospects of creating counterplay.

28.h4



Question: This is not a typical move if the objective is to attack on the queenside, so why is it played?

Show/Hide Solution

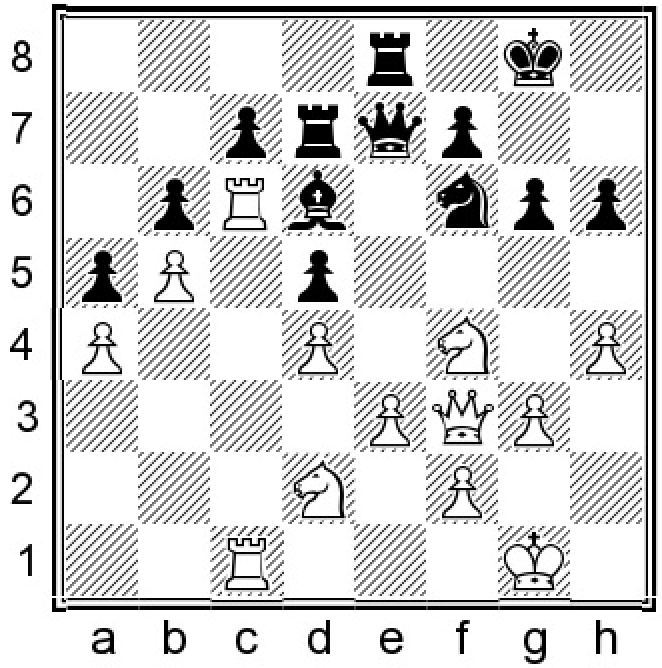
Answer: Now the situation is different. White is better and there is no impediment to his expansion on the kingside.

28...Qe7 29.Rc6 Nf6 30.Nf4 g6?!

“A tactical error,” said Carlsen. It avoids White’s idea of playing Nh5 to exchange the defender of the d-pawn, but it concedes other options.

Black cannot take advantage of the absence of the white queen from the queenside by playing 30...Bxf4 31.Qxf4 Qb4, with a double attack, due to 32.Nf3 and 32...Qxa4? loses to 33.Rxf6 gxf6 34.Qg4+ and 35.Qxd7.

No better is 32...Re4 33.Qf5, or 32...Ne4 33.Ne5 Rde7 34.Rxc7; we can see how important the d6-bishop is to holding Black’s position. It was necessary to wait and allow Nh5 if White wants to play it. Black’s position is already difficult. Another idea for White is Nb1-c3, increasing the pressure on d5.



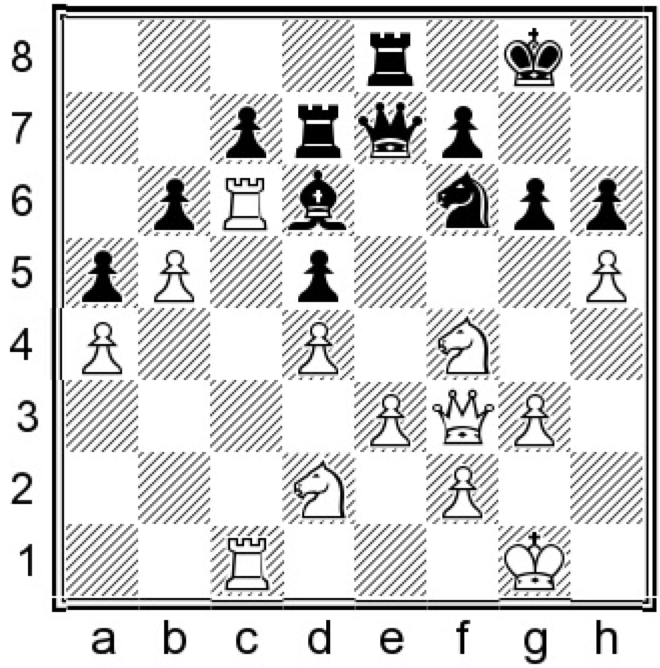
Exercise: What is the strongest move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.h5!

Not the immediate 31.Nxd5?! Nxd5 32.Qxd5, because rather than 32...Ba3 33.Qc4, where White has good compensation for the exchange, Black has 32...Bxg3! and after for example 33.Qg2 Bxh4 34.Nf3 Bf6 35.Qg3 Kg7, Black is fine.



31...Kg7

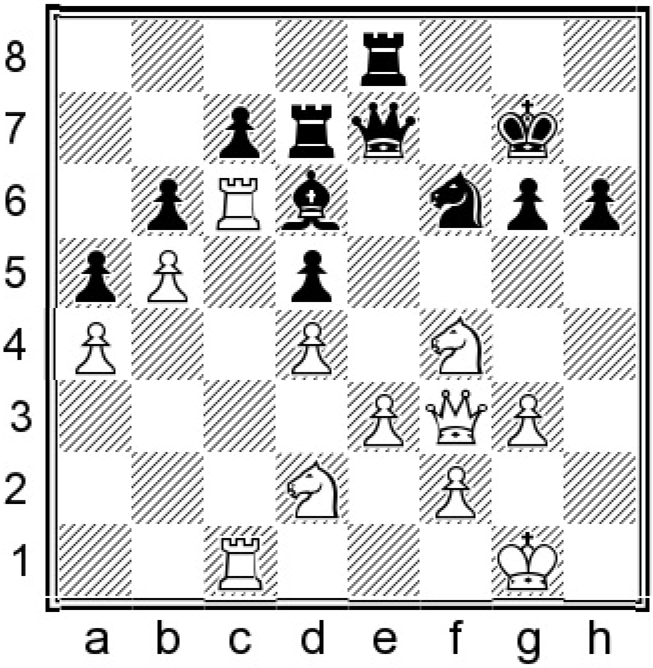
"It's typical that if you have a position with an advantage the tactics will be in your favour," commented Carlsen. If 31...g5 then 32.Nxd5! Nxd5 33.Qxd5 works, as after 33...Ba3 white wins by 34.Qf5 Bxc1 35.Rxh6, and there is no good defence against the threatened 36.Qh7+ and Qh8#. If 35...f6 then 36.Qg6+ wins. "Once the d5-pawn is gone the c4 square is available, and that is terrible" (Carlsen).

We see it after 33...Bxg3, too. White takes advantage of the f5 and c4 squares after 34.Qf5 Bd6 35.Nc4 and Black's position is falling apart.

Further, Black's position is untenable after 31...Bxf4 32.Qxf4 Nxh5 33.Qxh6 with the idea of playing Nf3 followed by Ng5 or Ne5.

Finally, after 31...gxh5 the strongest continuation is 32.Kg2 planning Rh1.

32.hxg6 fxg6



Exercise: What is the key move here to continue the previous manoeuvre?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

33.Nxd5!

Black's second rank is weaker after 32.hxg6 so this capture is now stronger.

33...Nxd5 34.Qxd5 Bxg3

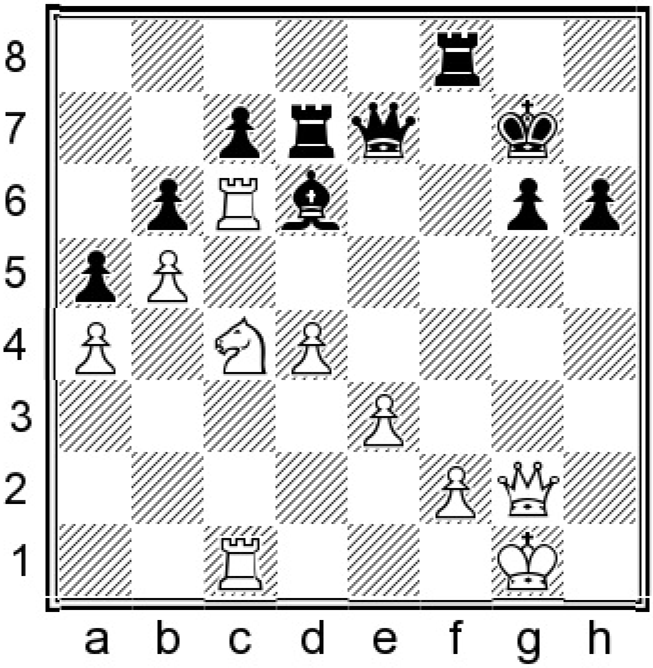
If 34...Ba3 then the weakened second rank is evident. White can play 35.Qxd7! Qxd7 36.Rxc7, winning. Carlsen thought that maybe this was what Aronian missed when he decided to enter into this variation some moves earlier.

35.Qg2

"Now my king may look weak, but I have such a dominant position that it doesn't matter" (Carlsen).

35...Bd6 36.Nc4 Rf8?!

36...Qd8, indicated by Carlsen, was more resistant. 37.Ne5? would be hasty due to 37...Bxe5 38.dxe5 Rd1+ 39.Rxd1 Qxd1+, but it can be prepared by e.g. 37.f4, and Black's position is bad anyway.



Exercise: What is the most accurate move now?

Show/Hide Solution

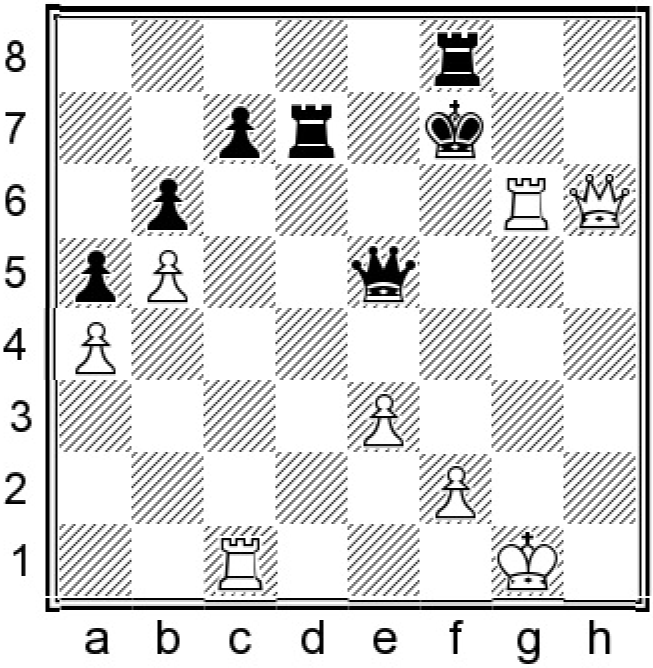
Answer:

37.Ne5!

Even better than 37.Nxd6 cxd6 38.Rxb6, and after the planned 38...Rf5 the nice reply 39.Rc5! follows. With White's choice g6 is attacked and also the rook, and what follows is forced.

37...Bxe5 38.Qxg6+ Kh8 39.Qxh6+ Kg8 40.dxe5 Qxe5 41.Rg6+ Kf7

If 41...Rg7 then simply 42.Rxg7+ Qxg7+ 43.Qxg7+ Kxg7 44.Rxc7+, but now Black's king is defenceless against the white major pieces.



Exercise: Carlsen played the strongest move here. What was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

42.Rc4!

Not the tempting 42.Rcc6? because of 42...Rd1+ 43.Kg2 Qd5+ and White’s king is unprotected.

42...Qa1+

Now after 42...Rd1+ 43.Kg2 Qd5+, the c4-rook allows 44.e4! Qxc4 45.Rf6+ Ke7 46.Qxf8+ Kd7 47.Rf7+, winning.

43.Kg2 Rh8 44.Rf4+ Ke8 45.Re6+ Re7

Or 45...Kd8 46.Qf8+ or 46.Rf8+ and mate.

46.Rxe7+ Kxe7 47.Re4+

The h8-rook is lost, because 47...Kd8 48.Rd4+ Qxd4 49.Qg5+ doesn’t work, and neither does 47...Kd7 48.Rd4+ Qxd4 49.Qc6+.

1–0

Carlsen played a Carlsbad structure again, with a typical minority attack, really as a preventive manoeuvre more than an attacking one. Black was fine, but, in Carlsen’s opinion, it was difficult to improve his position, and Black then played several inaccurate moves.

Black finished with two weak pawns, on c7 and d5. Carlsen took advantage of them with precise play, included an expansion on the kingside, and finished the game with a mating attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) "What is my opponent's next move or plan?" is a question that can help us find our own best move or correct plan. (8.Qa4+! 16.Na4!)

2.) "Which piece can I improve? Are all of my pieces in play?" These are questions we should ask ourselves from time to time. (17.Nb2! 23.Nd2! 21.Rc3!)

3.) "Which piece(s) should I exchange and which should I retain?" Answering these questions correctly will often bring you success. (25.Bg4! 27.Qf3!)

4.) Pay attention to multi-purpose moves. (18.Nd3!)

5.) Accurate calculation is essential to transform a positional advantage into something tangible. (23.Nd2! *23.g3?* 31.h5!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 13
Magnus Carlsen – Teimour Radjabov

Ruy Lopez [C65]

Wijk aan Zee (9), 20.01.2015

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.0-0

Carlsen deviates again from the more usual moves 5.c3 and 5.Bxc6 dxc6 which avoid 5...Nd4, moves he has nevertheless played in other important games.

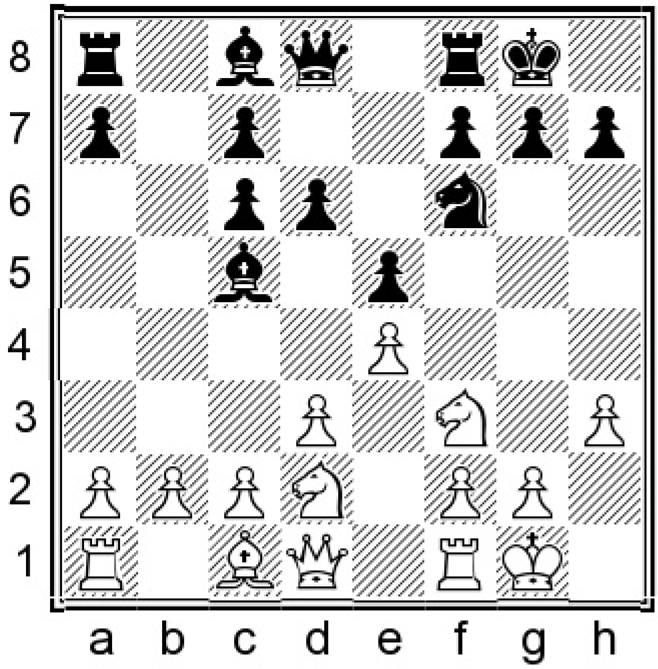
5...d6 6.Nbd2

6.Re1 is also possible, as we saw in Game 11, but transpositions are frequent in this line.

6...0-0 7.Bxc6

7.c3 transposes to more usual lines. Carlsen now enters rather unknown territory. His only ambition is to play a complex game, accepting there will be a position with chances for both sides.

7...bxc6 8.h3



Question: Is this move really necessary?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it is a necessary precaution in order to play Re1 and follow with the “Spanish manoeuvre” Nd2-f1, and maybe Ng3, as he will need to avoid ...Ng4 in this case. From g3 the knight defends the e4-pawn and White will be ready to think about occupying the center with c3 and d4.

8...h6

8...Re8, preparing ...d5, is also possible.

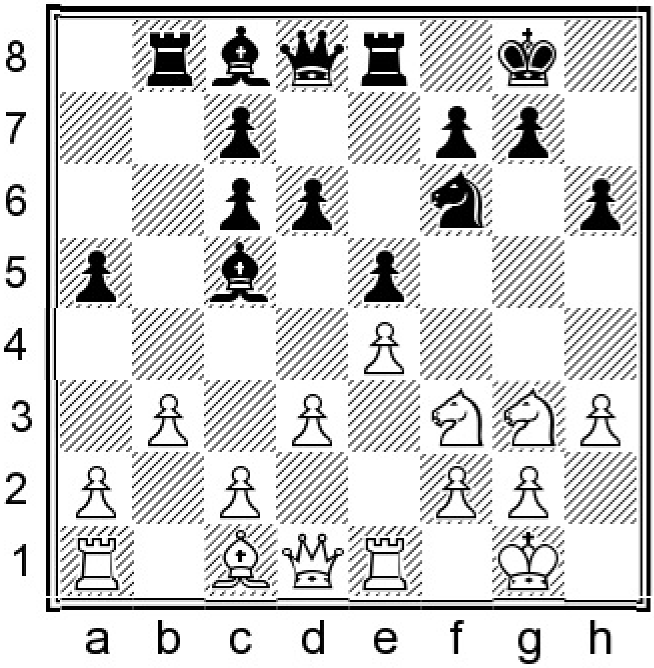
9.Re1 Re8 10.Nf1 a5

Kramnik immediately played 10...d5. After 11.exd5 Black is forced to continue 11...Qxd5 to support the e5-pawn. Then Black’s pawn structure remains evidently damaged, but after 12.Be3 Bf8 13.Bd2 (planning Bc3 and Nd2) 13...e4!, avoiding the strong threat Bc3, 14.dxe4 Nxe4 15.Ng3 Bb7 16.Bf4 Nd6, Black got a nice position. He is ready to play ...c5, activating the b7-bishop, Adams – Kramnik, Paris/St Petersburg 2013. This line became popular after that game.

11.Ng3 Rb8

The rook occupies a semi-open file and provokes b3. This seems a reasonable idea, but to play 11...a4 first seems more consistent with the previous moves. After 12.c3 Bb6 13.d4 exd4 14.cxd4 Black may try to activate the light-squared bishop with a move that we shall see later in the game, 14...c5, which leaves the b6-bishop passive for a while. But after 15.d5 Bb7, followed by ...c6, Black gets a satisfactory position.

12.b3



Question: This is what Black wanted. Isn’t there anything better for White?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This move liberates the c1-bishop, and there is nothing clearly better. It was possible to play c3 and then d4, as before, but that is not particularly worrisome for Black, and Carlsen prefers to delay his decision.

12...Bb4

Played after thinking for half an hour. It doesn’t spoil anything, but it isn’t better than the natural 12...a4 either. With ...a4 Black gets rid of the main weakness in his position. White can take on a4, but it will be impossible to retain the pawn.

13.Bd2 Ra8

Radjabov delays the development of his c8-bishop, accepting the at least two tempi lost from ...Rb8 and ...Ra8, although 12.b3 is not a true tempo win, and no harm was done: the closed nature of the position makes it possible.

14.c3

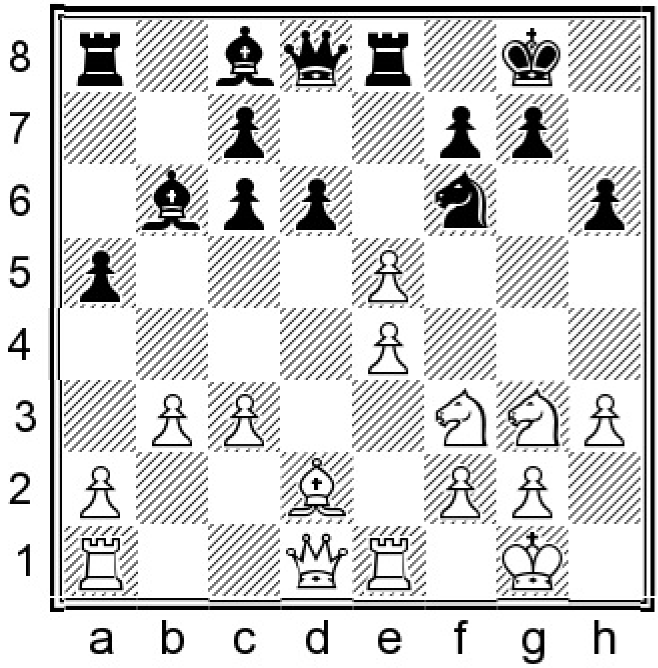
The alternative was to fix the a5-weakness by playing 14.a4, but Carlsen prefers to use the time gained to return to his plan of playing d4.

14...Bc5

After the time lost with the rook now we must add two more moves: 12...Bb4 and 14...Bc5. It is not clear that these tempos are very relevant, as White didn’t advance that much, but it seems that Carlsen’s choice to enter less practised terrain is justified, as Radjabov’ play was up to now very hesitant.

15.d4 Bb6 16.dxe5

After e.g. 16.Qc2 Black could have played 16...exd4 17.cxd4 (if 17.Nxd4 then the pawn sacrifice 17...a4! is interesting) 17...c5 18.d5 Bb7, followed by ...c6, an idea we already saw.

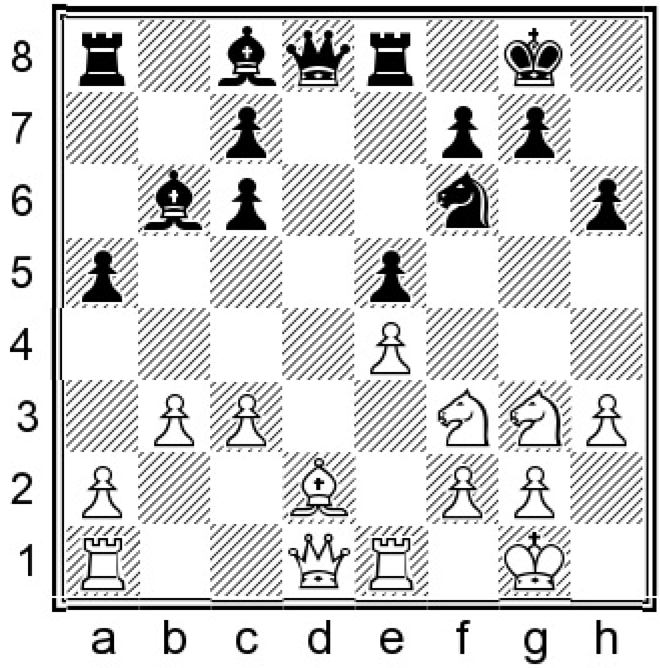


Question: Why did Carlsen eliminate the central tension?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because the white knights appreciate a fixed pawn structure, and also because Black loses the chance of activating his bishops by playing ...exd4 followed by ...c5 and/or ...d5.

16...dxe5



Exercise: How did Carlsen proceed?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.c4!

Complementing the previous move, White plans to follow with Bc3 and there is also the future possibility of playing c5, leaving the b6-bishop almost dead.

17...Nh7

The knight withdraws with the typical idea of eventually reaching d4 via f8-e6.

It is a good idea, but it is also a move that withdraws the knight away from the center and it is time consuming, so the health of Black’s position depends on the knight arriving on d4 in good conditions.

18.Qe2

18.Qc2 has a more logical appearance, threatening c5, but after 18...Qe7 19.Bc3 f6 20.Nf5 Qc5, followed by ...Nf8-e6 or ...Ng5, Black’s position looks solid enough.

18...Nf8

Continuing with the idea of reaching d4.

19.Be3 c5

19...Ne6? failed to 20.Nxe5. Black plays a very ambitious move. Of course Radjabov is aware of the lack of mobility of his b6-bishop, but he thinks it is momentary.

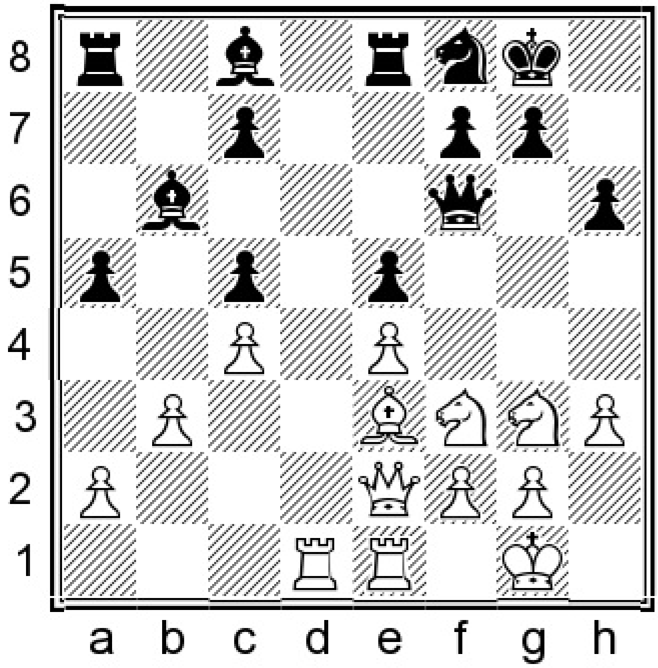
Now getting his knight to d4 is of greater importance. If he succeeds, he will have a nice position.

Playing 19...Bxe3 20.Qxe3 Ng6 to avoid this would mean renouncing the idea initiated with 17... Nh7. White would be somewhat better. The same would happen in case of 20...f6 21.Rad1 Qe7 22.Nh4.

20.Rad1 Qf6

If 20...Qe7 then 21.a4 cementing the queenside could follow, and after 21...Ne6 White can play 22.Nxe5.

After what Radjabov chose the e5-pawn is defended and Black continues with his idea of reaching d4, but there is a price to pay for it.



Exercise: What is the flaw in Black's idea?

Show/Hide Solution

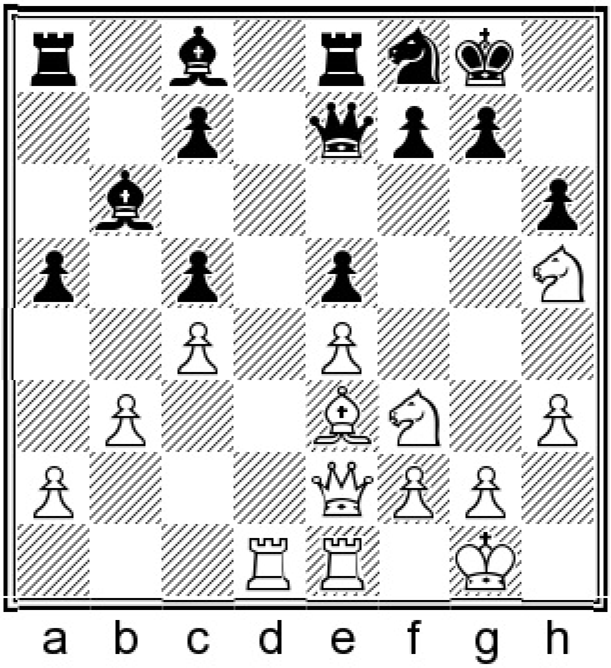
Answer:

21.Nh5!

Harassing the queen, and if now 21...Qg6 with a double attack then 22.Nh4! follows, when 22...Qxe4? would be bad due to 23.Nxg7! Kxg7? 24.Bxh6+. We clearly see the superior activity of the white pieces having a great impact in these tactical complications.

The black queen must withdraw.

21...Qe7

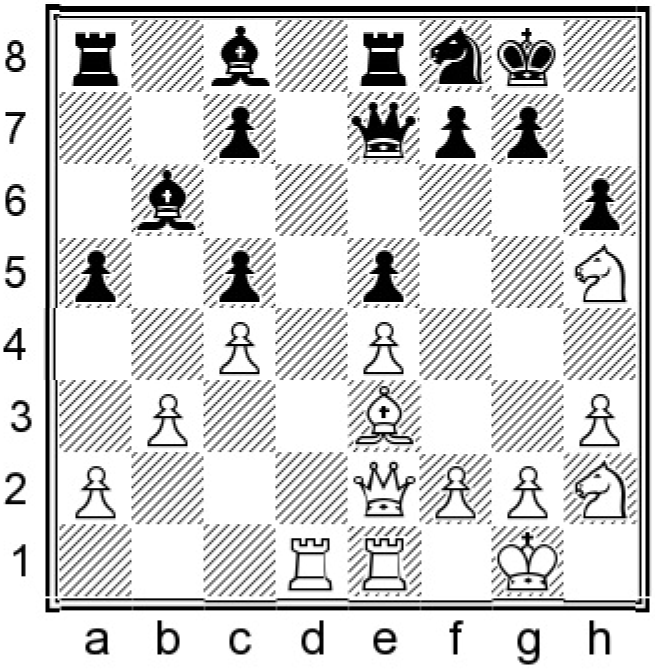


22.Nh2

An aggressive move and double-edged, too. It gives space to his queen to create problems for the poorly-defended black king: the queen plans to move to g4. However, it also gives Black more choices. The e5-pawn is no longer attacked by the knight, so the move ...Ne6 should be easier to play.

22.Qd2 (with the obvious idea 23.Bxh6) can also be considered. It would probably be answered by 22...Kh7, and a third possibility, already mentioned, is 22.a4, eliminating the possibility of ...a4, after which the mobility of the b6-bishop would be reduced even more. In both cases, Black should continue with his plan to send his knight to d4.

For example, after 22.a4 Black cannot immediately play 22...Ne6? due to 23.Nxe5 Nd4 24.Bxd4 cxd4 25.Nd3 with an advantage, so he should probably play 22...c6 instead, followed by ...Bc7 and finally ...Ne6.



22...Kh7

The king defends h6, preparing ...g6. In case of 22...g6 Black needs to reckon with 23.Bxh6 gxh5 24.Qxh5 with an attack, and the zero influence of the b6-bishop makes it more serious.

Nonetheless, the key question was to see if 22...Ne6 was playable. White can play the threatening 23.Qg4, but after 23...g6 White needs to prevent 24...Ng7 winning, and the strength of White's attack is not obvious after 24.Qg3 Ng5.

There are more ways to attack. 23.Qf3 seems to be more dangerous, and after 23...Kh8 24.Qg3, with the arrival of more attacking pieces, such as Ng4, combinations could appear on the weak points g7, f6 and h6. After 24...f6 25.Ng4 Black doesn't have time to play 25...Nd4 due to 26.Bxh6! gxh6 27.Ngxf6, with a winning attack.

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply to Black's idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23.Qf3!

The black king is the target. This move impedes 23...Ne6? due to 24.Qf5+ g6 25.Nf6+, winning.

23...f6

Exercise: How does White's offensive continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

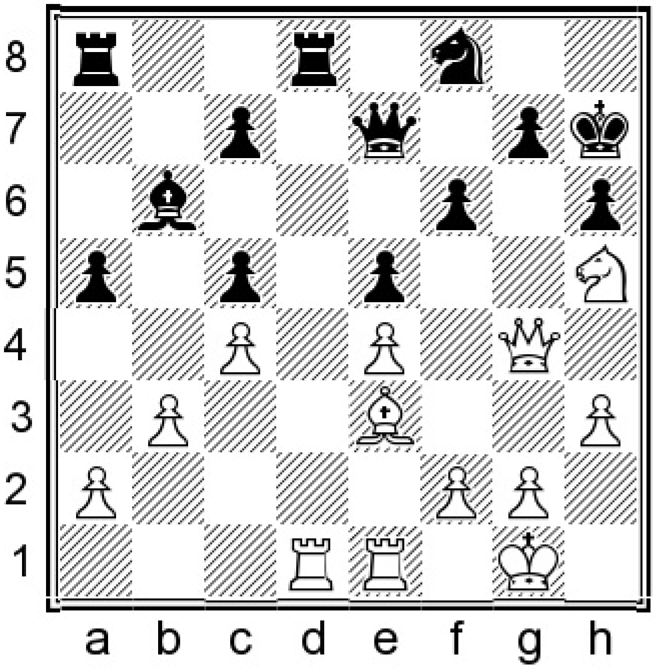
24.Ng4!

Adding more attacking pieces, this obliges Black to get rid of the light-squared defender, because 24...Ne6 fails again to 25.Bxh6! Nd4 26.Rxd4, demolishing Black's castled position.

24...Bxg4 25.Qxg4 Red8?

This is the first clear mistake by Black.

It was necessary to expel the h5-knight with 25...g6!. After for example 26.Ng3 a4 it would be a complicated fight, although White would still have the initiative with 27.f4.



Exercise: How to show the defect of the last black move?

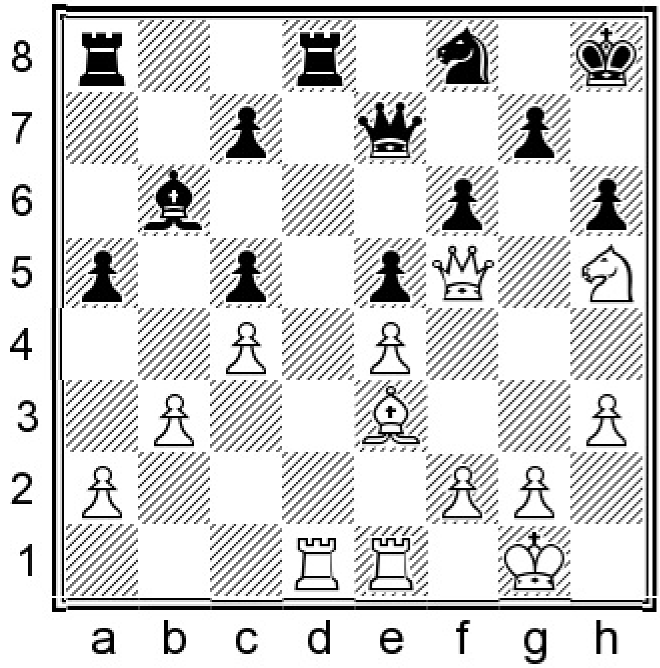
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Qf5+!

The forces the king to retreat, because 26...g6 is not possible due to the presence of the h5-knight: there would follow 27.Qxf6, so the strong knight will continue in his attacking position.

26...Kh8



Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played now?

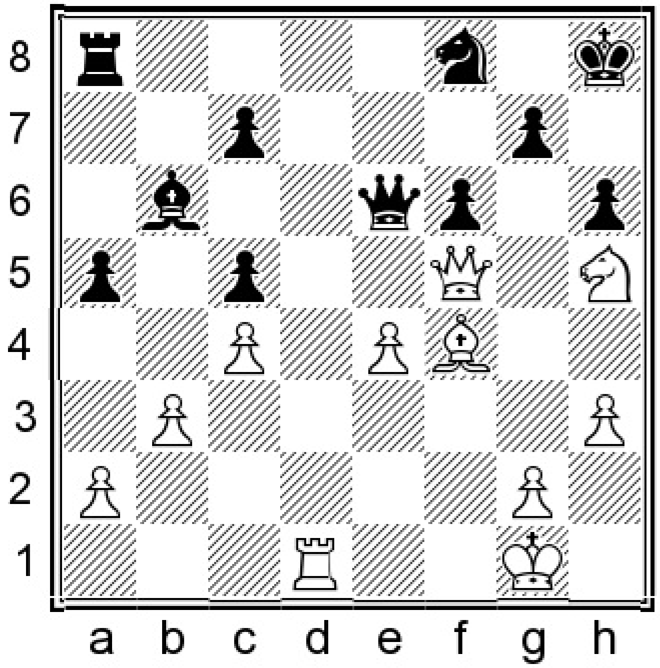
☐ Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.f4!

Opening files on the flank where there is a superiority of forces before Black can reorganize his pieces.

27...Rxd1 28.Rxd1 exf4 29.Bxf4 Qe6



Black tries to soften the pressure by expelling the white queen.

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

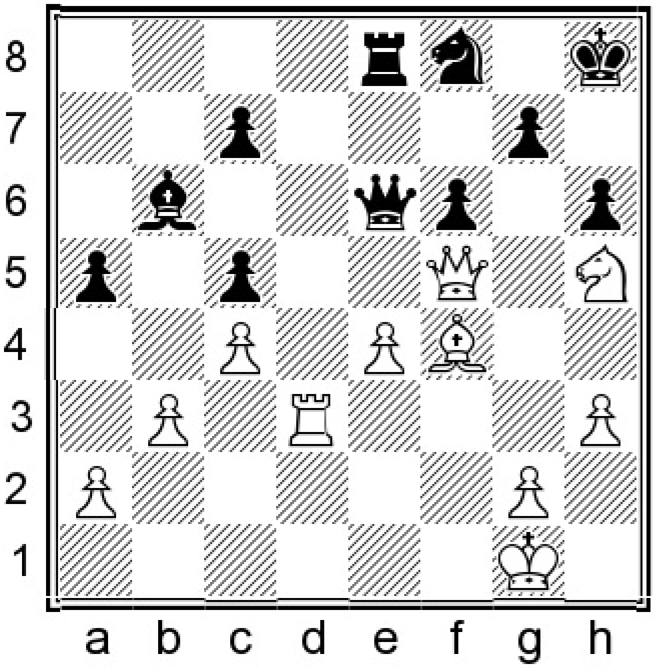
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

30.Rd3!

Planning 31.Rg3, and making it clear that Black’s troubles will not disappear without queens on the board, as after 30...Qxf5 31.exf5 the black knight has no mobility. It must stay in its position to defend the d7 square. After for example 31...Re8, aiming to answer 32.Rg3 with 32...Re7, White can continue 32.Kf2 and Black is almost paralysed. White could play Bd2–c3 followed by Nf4, combined with Rg3.

30...Re8



Exercise: How did Carlsen now strike a decisive blow?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.Nxg7!

Even with just a few pieces left on the board, White is playing his attack almost a piece up due to the absence of the b6-bishop from the game, even with equal material.

31...Kxg7

The ending arising from 31...Qxf5 32.Nxf5 Rxe4 33.Bxh6 is painful for Black.

Exercise: How does the attack continues?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

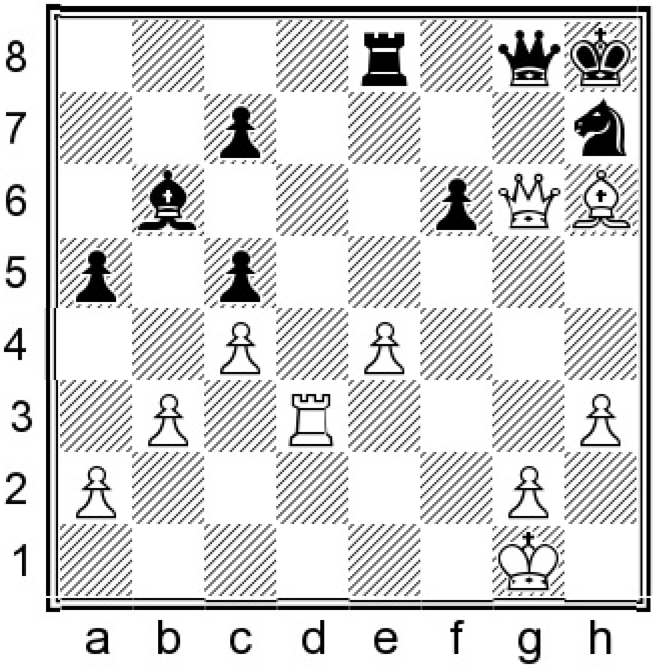
32.Qh5!

Threatening 33.Rg3+, and the h6-pawn is undefendable.

The attack must be carried out accurately, not the hasty 32.Rg3+? allowing the king to escape with 32...Kf7.

32...Nh7 33.Bxh6+ Kh8 34.Qg6 Qg8

If 34...Rg8 then 35.Rd8!



Exercise (simple): "White to play and win", how?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

35.Bg7+!

Recovering part of the material.

35...Qxg7 36.Qxe8+

White not only has recovered part of the sacrificed material, but his attack hasn't subsided. Now his advantage is winning, because the b6-bishop is still unable to help the defence.

36...Qf8

After 36...Nf8 play can continue as in the game, 37.e5! fxe5 38.Rf3 Kg8 and now White prepares Rg3 with 39.Kh2!

37.Qe6 Qh6

The relief would be brief after 37...Ng5, and 38.Qf5 would follow with the idea of 39.Rd7 and then h4.

38.e5!

The same strike as before. After exchanging the f6-pawn the precarious solidity of Black's defence breaks down. 38.Rd8+ was also winning.

38...Qc1+ 39.Kh2 Qf4+ 40.Rg3

If 40...Ng5 then 41.Qe7 wins.

1–0

Carlsen gave the game an unusual character very early, entering unfamiliar terrain where both players had to improvise at the board. It was a successful decision, because his opponent's play was erratic.

Black voluntarily ended with a piece out of play, thinking it was only temporary, but Carlsen sharpened the position without allowing the piece to re-enter the game. One clear mistake by Black was enough for Carlsen to gain a clear advantage and win by a direct attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Carlsen eliminated the central tension only when he had a definite plan to support the centre. (16.dxe5! 17.c4!)

2.) "If one piece is bad, the whole position is bad." To avoid this, after making a risky positional choice, accurate play is essential. (19...c5?! *25...g6!*)

3.) To take advantage of your opponent's badly placed piece it is necessary to act quickly. (21.Nh5! 22.Nh2! 26.Qf5+! 27.f4! 31.Nxg7!)

4.) "What is my opponent threatening or planning?" is a question which you should ask yourself before making a decision. (32.Qh5! *32.Rg3+?*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 14

Magnus Carlsen – Shakhriyar Mamedyarov

Slav Defence [D11]

Shamkir (2), 18.04.2015

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.e3 g6

The Schlechter Variation is played only after 4.e3, when the c1-bishop cannot move outside the pawn chain.

5.Nc3 Bg7 6.Be2 0-0 7.0-0 b6

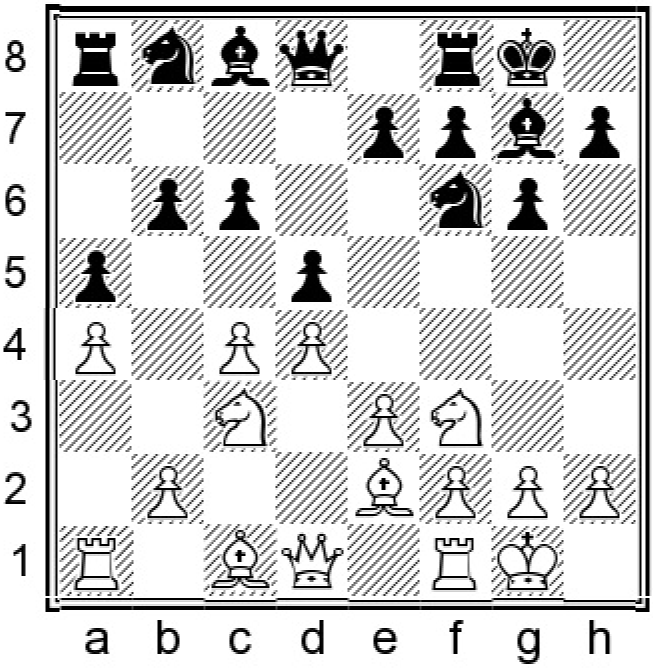
This is the move Gata Kamsky likes in this position. Rather surprisingly there are many options, such as 7...e6 also with the idea of developing the c8-bishop to b7 later, as well as 7...a6, 7...Be6, etc.

8.a4 a5

Mamedyarov wasn't sure about this move. 8...Bb7 allowing 9.a5 was the choice of a good defender of the Schlechter Variation, the Chinese player Bu Xianzhi. His game against Bukavshin in Moscow 2012 continued 9...e6 10.b4 dxc4 11.Bxc4 Nd5 12.Nxd5 exd5 13.Bd3 b5 14.Nd2 a6 15.Nb3 Nd7, and White had a slight advantage[2].

[2] For more on the wonderful games of Ivan Bukavshin, a very strong grandmaster who had the potential to become a candidate before his untimely death, see *Grandmaster Ivan Bukavshin: A Chess Prodigy's Career in 64 Games* by Jakov Geller (Elk and Ruby, 2020)

The b7-bishop is very passive, but it holds the queenside, while the c1-bishop cannot boast of activity either. After that game Black began to defend his position successfully playing 9...bxa5, a move with an ugly appearance, but for concrete reasons it seems to be adequate: after 10.Qa4 dxc4 11.Qxa5 Nbd7 12.Bxc4 c5 13.dxc5 Qc8 Black got a reasonable position, Sevian – Li Chao, Tbilisi 2017.



Exercise: How did Carlsen follow up?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

9.cxd5

Now Black has a difficult choice.

9...cxd5

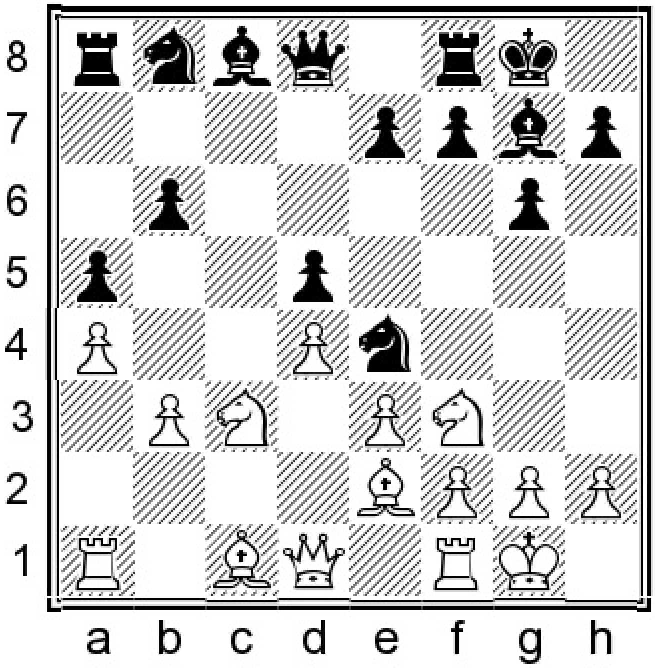
Both sides now have weaknesses on the queenside; at first sight the b5-square seems more important than the weakness on b4.

Conceding White a central advantage is not something a Grunfeld player is afraid of, so 9...Nxd5 was the alternative. After 10.e4 Nb4 11.Be3 Bg4 12.h3 Bxf3 13.Bxf3 N8a6, Anand – Wang Yue, Nanjin 2010, White has a slight advantage.

10.b3 Ne4?

At the press conference after the game Carlsen was very diplomatic: he said “I was a little bit unsure” about this move.

Mamedyarov was more critical about it: “It was very bad,” he said, as after the following exchange “it is easy to play with White,” but difficult for him. He suggested 10...Nc6 or 10...Ba6 as better tries, admitting that White was a little better.



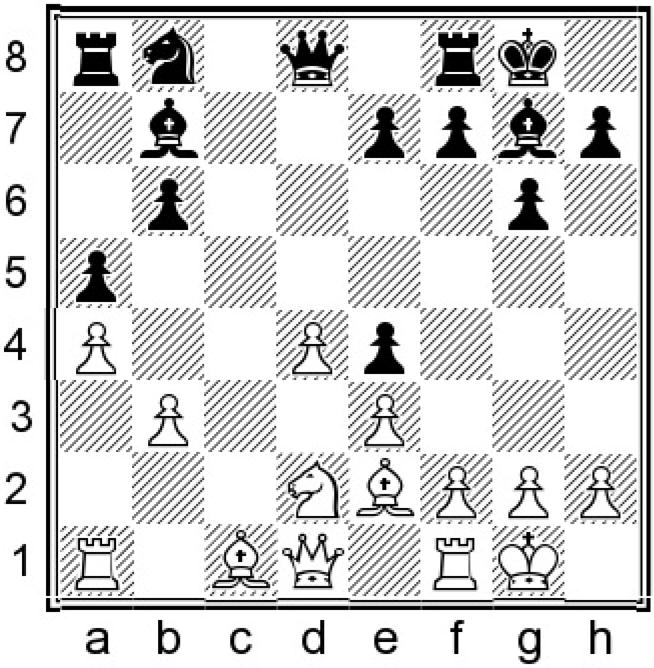
Question: What was Black’s idea playing 10...Ne4?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black gains the d5-square, which is an ideal post for his remaining knight. The problem is that reaching d5 is hard for the knight.

11.Nxe4 dxe4 12.Nd2 Bb7

The typical counterblow 12...e5? wasn't possible because of, among other reasons, 13.d5! (inserting 13.Ba3 is also strong) 13...Qxd5 14.Ba3 Re8 (or 14...Rd8 15.Nxe4 followed by Nd6, Bc4, etc. with a crushing position) 15.Bb5! Bd7 (if 15...Rd8 then 16.Nc4!, 16.Be7 or 16.Nxe4 are all strong) 16.Bc4 Qb7 17.Nxe4! Qxe4 18.Bd5, winning.



Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13.Ba3

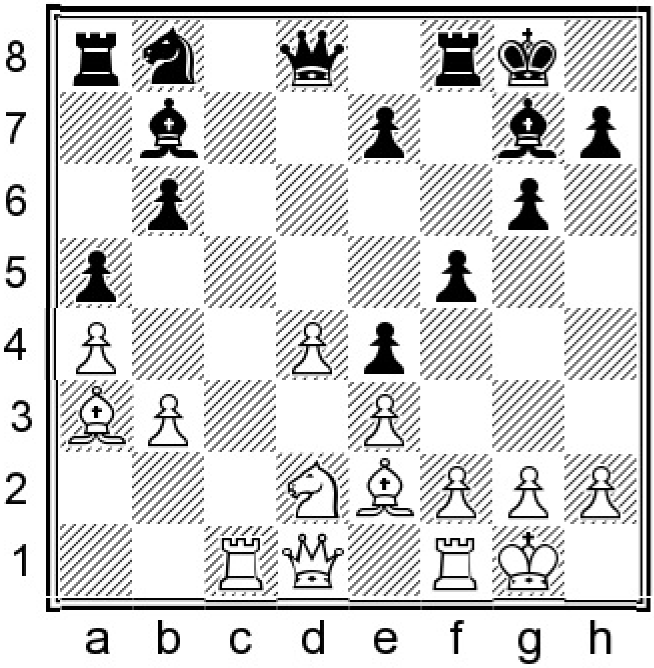
The bishop takes advantage of the distant position of the g7-bishop. At the press conference, Carlsen said that White was already better: both his bishops are active and the black queenside has too many weaknesses.

13...f5

If the knight wants to reach d5, this move is also forced; now the e4-pawn is defended, but more weaknesses appear, and also more doubts about Black's idea. Or, to put it more precisely, it confirms the doubts about the correctness of 10...Ne4.

14.Rc1

This is a very useful and flexible move: before deciding how to place the other forces, White first occupies the c-file.



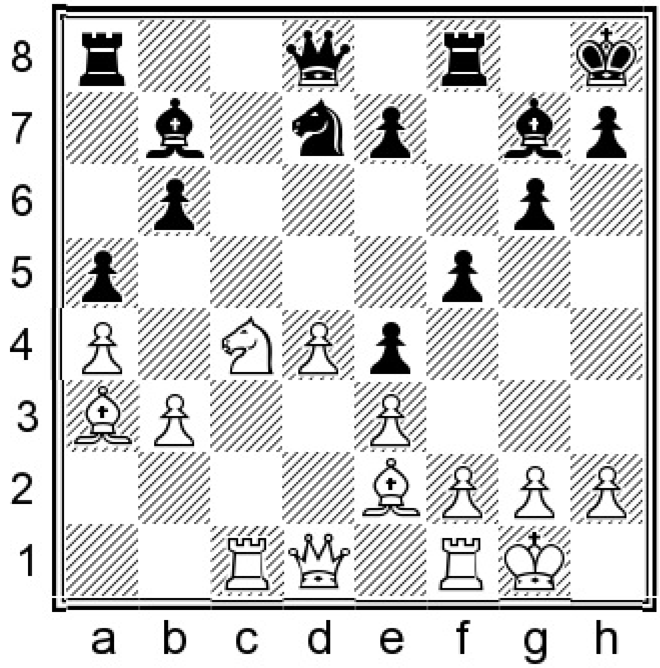
14...Kh8

Question: Why does Black play this preparatory move? Why didn’t he continue with his plan to head for d5 at once?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black can of course reach d5 with his knight, but it is not for free. White will take advantage of the weaknesses created on the queenside. After 14...Nd7 there could follow 15.Bb5! Nf6 16.Nc4 Nd5 17.Ne5 with several ideas, such as 18.Bd7–e6+ or 18.Nc6, without forgetting to use the c-file to improve his position. After for example 17...Rc8 18.Rxc8 Qxc8 19.Bd7 Qc7 20.Be6+ Kh8 21.Nf7+ Kg8 22.Nd8+ Kh8 23.Nxb7 Qxb7 24.Qc2, White dominates the c-file and the light squares, with a clear advantage.

15.Nc4 Nd7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Exercise: Carlsen played a strong move. What was it?

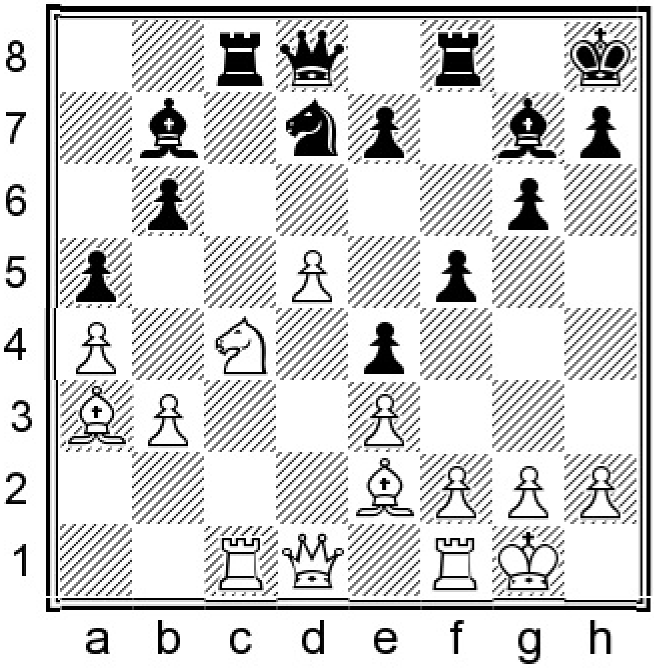
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.d5!

And Black can forget his dreams about a knight on d5.

16...Rc8



Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.d6

Of this move, which would also be played in answer to 16...Nf6, Carlsen said: “Once I get to d6 the position is very unpleasant for Black,” because “he cannot get serious counterplay against the king and I break through on the queenside.”

17...e6

17...exd6? 18.Nxd6 or 18.Qxd6 accelerates the end, White wins material.

Exercise: What is the most energetic move now?

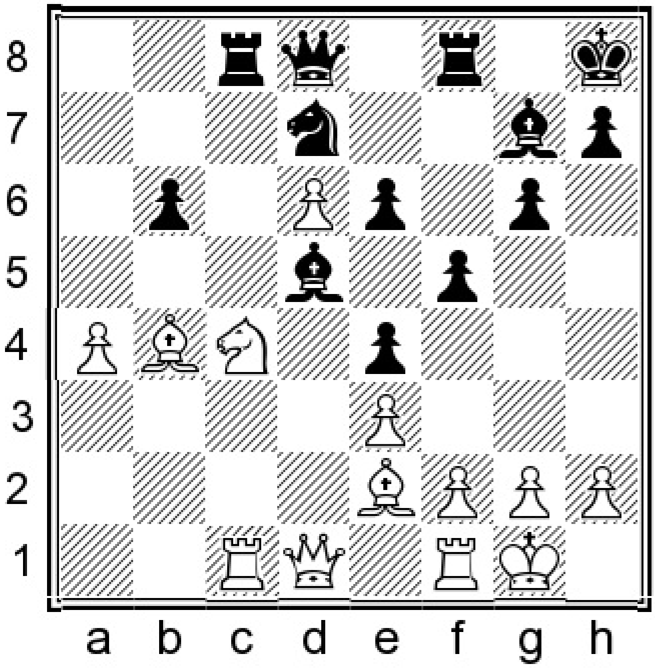
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.b4!

Carlsen begins to open the game. After a few moves all his pieces will be very active on the queenside, while the g7-bishop, for example, will not enter the fight.

18...axb4 19.Bxb4 Bd5



Exercise: There are several moves that give White the advantage, but what do you think Carlsen chose here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

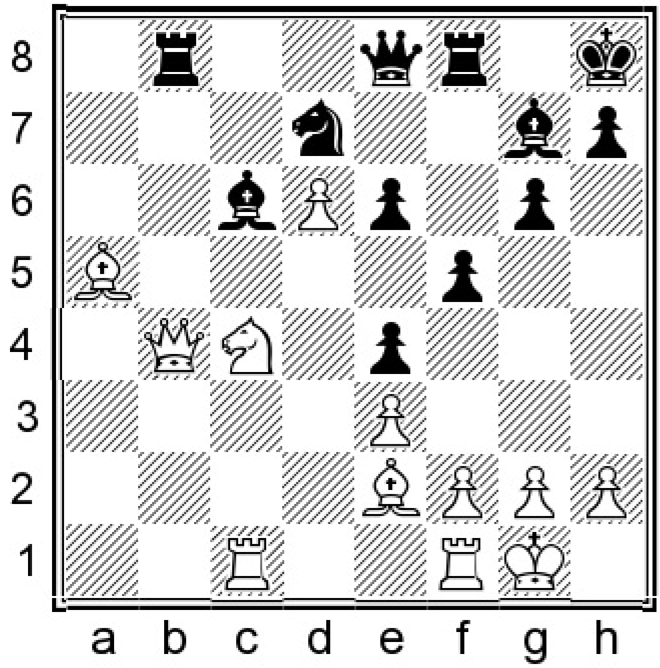
20.a5!

The most energetic move again, opening more files.

20...bxa5

After 20...Bxc4 21.Rxc4 Rxc4 22.Bxc4 bxa5 there could follow 23.Ba3 Qf6 and 24.Qc2 intending Rb1 or 24.Qb3 Rb8 25.Qa2, leaving White with clear superiority. The d6-pawn is the most important element of the position, and once the f1-rook joins the offensive Black's position will be untenable.

21.Bxa5 Qe8 22.Qa4 Bc6 23.Qb4 Rb8



Exercise: What had Carlsen in mind at this point?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24.Nb6!

Carlsen played his last moves very quickly, without fearing the pin he voluntarily enters into, because Black cannot take advantage of it. White has several ideas, the main one being to infiltrate through the c-file and eliminate the piece blocking his passed d-pawn.

24...Ne5

24...Nxb6 25.Bxb6 Qd7 26.Ba6, or 26.Rc2 intending Rfc1 was very unpleasant, too.

25.Qc5 Ba8

Both players evaluated the position as lost for Black here. In response to something more tenacious such as 25...Rf7 White could play 26.Bc3 Nd7 27.Nxd7 Bxd7 28.Bxg7+ Kxg7 (or 28...Rxg7) 29.Qe5+ Kg8 30.Rc7 and after the simplifications Black is paralysed, while the f1-rook will enter the game very soon.

26.Bc3 Nd7 27.Bxg7+ Kxg7 28.Nxd7 Qxd7 29.Qe5+

There will follow 30.Rc7, winning.

1–0

Carlsen decided to stabilize the center and a position occurred where both sides had weaknesses.

Black played very ambitiously, changing the pawn structure and trying to put his knight on an ideal central square: the fight was about that, White trying to stop it, and Black taking the necessary steps to succeed. With energetic play Carlsen emerged as the winner, frustrating Black's plans, opening files in the center and on "his" side. The game ended with a quick and surprising attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) General considerations are important to evaluate changes in the pawn structure. (8...a5? 9.cxd5!), but concrete calculation is also required. (*9...bxa5!*)

2.) A risky move, based on a good idea, must be carefully considered to really know if the idea can be executed. (10...Ne4?)

3.) "The side who possesses an advantage must attack" (Steinitz). But not necessarily directed against the opposing king. Sometimes the attack is launched on the queenside. (16.d5! 17.d6! 18.b4! 20.a5!)

4.) If you have a passed pawn, one of the priorities is to get rid of the blockader. (24.Nb6!)

5.) Tactical considerations should be prioritised over general considerations. (24.Nb6!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 15

Magnus Carlsen – Maxime Vachier-Lagrave

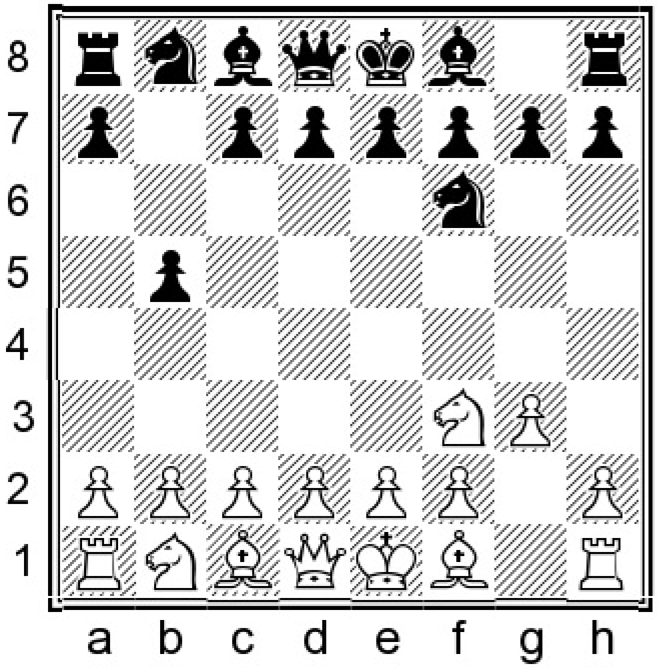
Reti Opening [A05]

Shamkir (5), 21.04.2015

1.Nf3

Carlsen makes clear he wants to avoid some lines of the Grunfeld Defence, the main weapon of the best French player.

1...Nf6 2.g3 b5



So, no Grunfeld this time, and very soon the position will be entirely “new” for both players.

3.Bg2

Carlsen thought for 11 minutes before playing his third move, which was also something new.

Both players looked at 3.c3, which was played by Korchnoi in a famous game. That continued 3...Bb7 4.a4 a6 5.e3 Nc6 6.d4 e6 7.b4 Be7 8.Nbd2 Na7 9.Bd3 0-0 10.e4 d6, Korchnoi – Karpov, Moscow 1973.

The line 3...e6 4.Qb3 was mentioned by both players at the press conference after the game. It is a typical idea, with colours reversed (against the Sokolsky Opening 1.b4). They may continue 4...a6 5.a4 Bb7 6.axb5 Bd5 7.Qc2 (if 7.c4? then comes the well-known trick 7...Bxc4! 8.Qxc4? axb5, winning) 7...axb5 8.Rxa8 Bxa8 9.Qb3 Bxf3 10.exf3 c6 with an equal position according to Vachier-Lagrave. Although Carlsen initially slightly preferred White after 11.d4, he later also thought the position to be rather equal, and Black would play ...d6.

In Quinteros – Miles, Buenos Aires 1979, we can see the idea Carlsen played in the next move, 3.Na3 a6 4.c4. Miles decided to reduce the mobility of the a3-knight with 4...c6, and there followed 5.Bg2 d5 6.b3 Nbd7 7.0-0 e5 8.cxd5 cxd5 9.d4 e4 10.Ne5 Bd6 11.f4. White finally won a nice attacking game, but not due to the opening.

3...Bb7 4.Na3

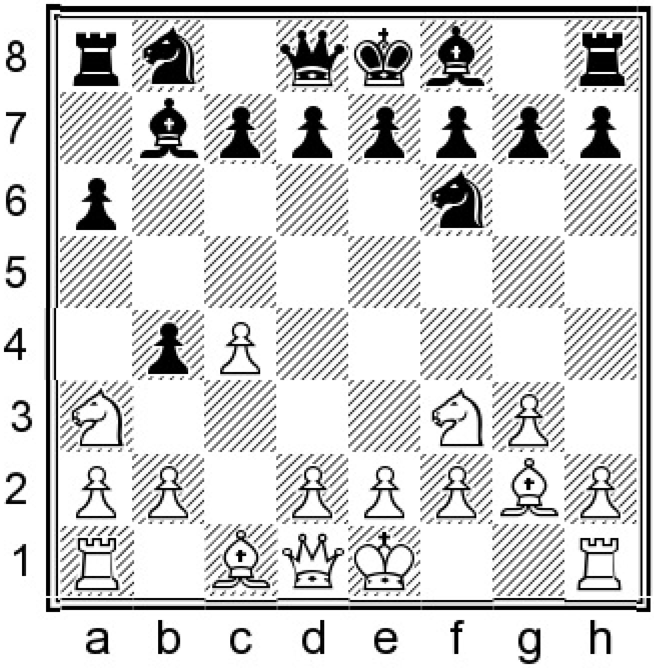
Both players were already "out of the book", something very rarely seen at this level.

4...a6

Now it was Vachier-Lagrave who thought for 18 minutes, considering 4...a6 and 4...b4.

After 4...b4 5.Nc4 a5 6.d3 "I would like my c4-knight," said Carlsen. Vachier-Lagrave was not keen about Black here either.

5.c4 b4



Question: Is advancing the pawn now good?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Let's see what the players said: "I decided to play ...b4 because in the Queen's Indian Defence the knight is not well posted on c2," said Vachier-Lagrave.

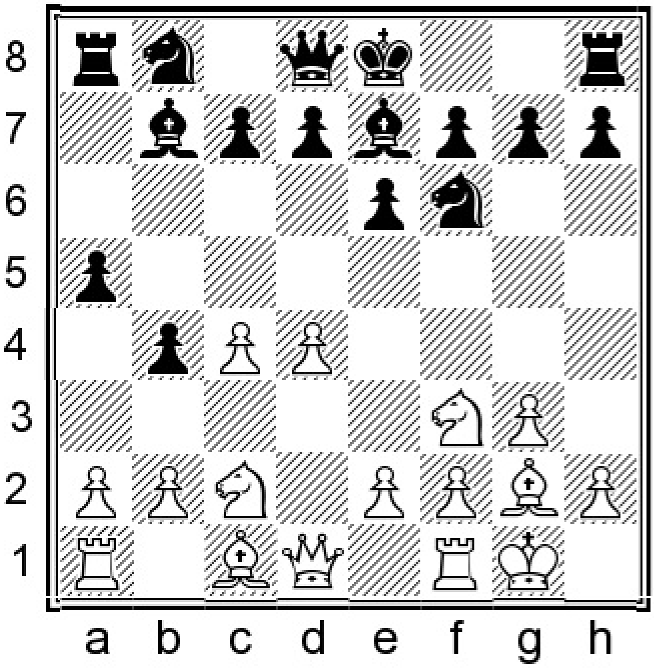
"Yes, but for that you wasted many moves," was what Carlsen answered.

5...e5 was analysed by both players at the press conference. This is unusual, because masters want to keep their opening preparation or opinions secret, but this was an atypical case, as they had not studied the position at home, so no secret was revealed. They briefly look at the line 6.0-0 e4 7.Nd4 (after 7.Nh4 d5 8.cxd5 Qxd5 9.d3 g5 there is the surprising 10.Nf3) 7...d5 8.d3 (8.cxb5 is also possible) 8...c5 9.Nf5 g6 10.Ne3?! (10.Nh6!) 10...d4 11.Nd5 Nxd5 12.Bxe4 Bg7 with equality, but after 12...bxc4! Black is better.

6.Nc2 e6 7.d4 a5

Aiming to retain the b4-pawn. Both players agreed that after 7...Be7 8.a3 bxa3 White is better after the typical move in this situation 9.b3!.

8.0-0 Be7



9.d5

Question: This thematic advance is known in similar positions of the Queen's Indian Defence, reducing the activity of the b7-bishop. Is White already better?

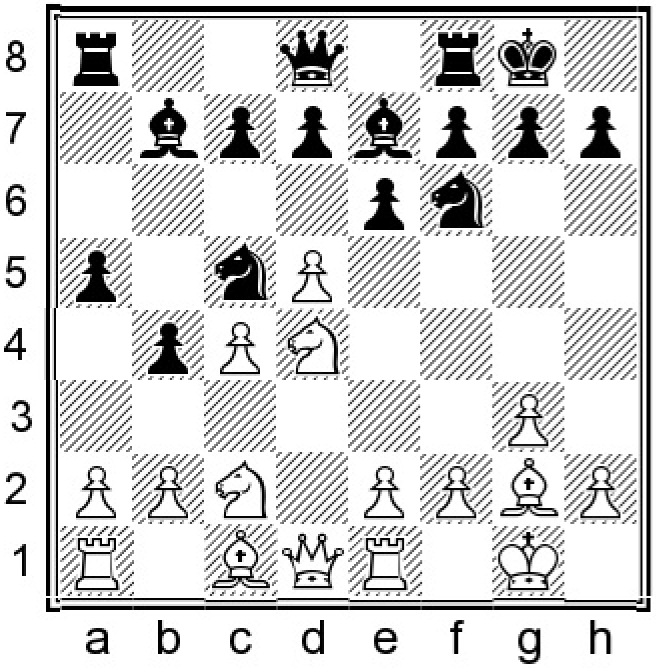
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The pawn structure is similar to that opening, that's true, but this position has its own character. This pawn advance effectively reduces the activity of the b7-bishop, but here it loses control of the c5 square, something Black uses in his favour immediately. The position is about equal.

9...Na6 10.Nfd4 Nc5 11.Re1

With the evident idea of play e4.

11...0-0



Question: Why is that played by Black?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Indeed, Carlsen was surprised. He was expecting 11...Nfe4, but White is somewhat better anyway.

There are several attractive possibilities in that case, such as 12.a3, and after 12...bxa3 13.Nxa3 followed by f3 and e4 White is slightly better.

Carlsen also considered 12.f3 Nd6 13.e4 0-0 ("I don't know if you can play ...Nxc4," said Carlsen; and that is not clear) 14.b3 e5, but this is not the best for White. Black gets a better version of what he gets in the game.

A different alternative, mentioned by Carlsen, was 12.Nb3 Nxb3 13.axb3 Nc5 14.Nd4, and White is a little better, which is typical in Indian positions where the b7-bishop is restricted by the d5-pawn, as we said.

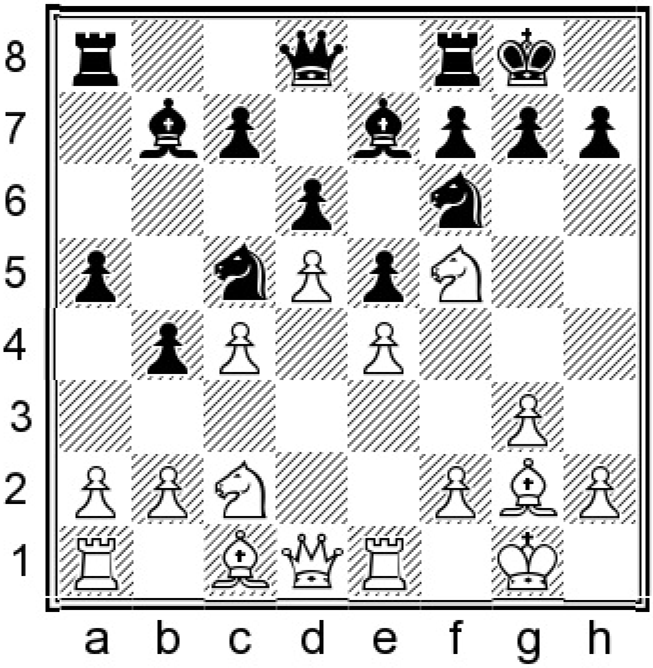
12.e4 e5

Vachier-Lagrave considered 12...d6 13.dxe6 Nfxe4, but he didn't like it, as after 14.Qg4 Nf6 15.Qe2 White is somewhat better. Black's position has some weaknesses.

After 15...Bxg2 16.Kxg2 Re8?! then 17.Nc6 is strong, as Vachier-Lagrave demonstrated.

Instead of 13...Nfxe4, the alternative 13...fxe6, then 14.e5 dxe5 15.Bxb7 Nxb7 16.Nxe6 Qxd1 17.Rxd1 Rfc8 doesn't look bad for Black.

13.Nf5 d6



"To be out of the book was never so funny as today!" tweeted Carlsen after the game. "It was, undoubtedly, until move 14!" was Vachier-Lagrave's answer in another tweet.

Exercise: Which move made Black's position less funny?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.Bg5!

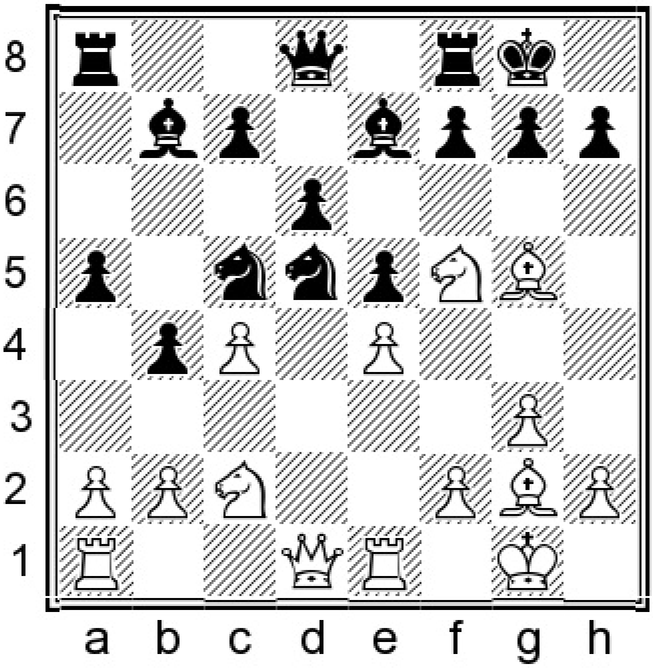
This pawn sacrifice was unexpected by the official commentators of the game, and also for Vachier-Lagrave.

Carlsen also considered 14.f4, but he wasn't sure. Vachier-Lagrave planned to meet it with 14...Nfd7, and after 15.Nxe7+ Qxe7 16.f5 c6 "there are too many loose ends, it must be good for Black," said Carlsen. After 17.Ne3 Black moves back with 17...Nf6 and has a good position.

14...Nxd5

Accepting the challenge. “It took me a lot of time to understand what the point of the sacrifice was, and then I thought OK, it won’t be easy today,” commented Vachier-Lagrave.

Not to take the pawn e.g. with 14...Bc8 15.Nce3 h6 16.Bh4 looks bad for Black, said Carlsen. Vachier-Lagrave suggested 16...Kh7, “but then 17.f4,” Carlsen answered, and neither of them liked Black’s position.



Exercise: What had Carlsen in mind?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

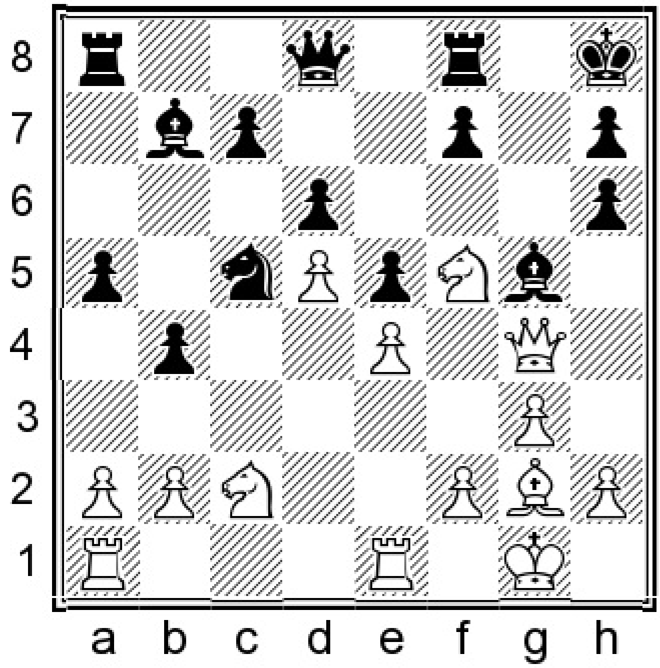
15.Bh6!

This is the point of the pawn sacrifice: the black kingside will be weakened and White will have a knight on f5 that is impossible to expel.

15...gxh6 16.Qg4+

16.cxd5 Kh8 17.Qh5 immediately was the other possibility. Carlsen was unsure about what was better, but he chose 16.Qg4+ because he liked the possibility of playing h4 later.

16...Bg5 17.cxd5 Kh8



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

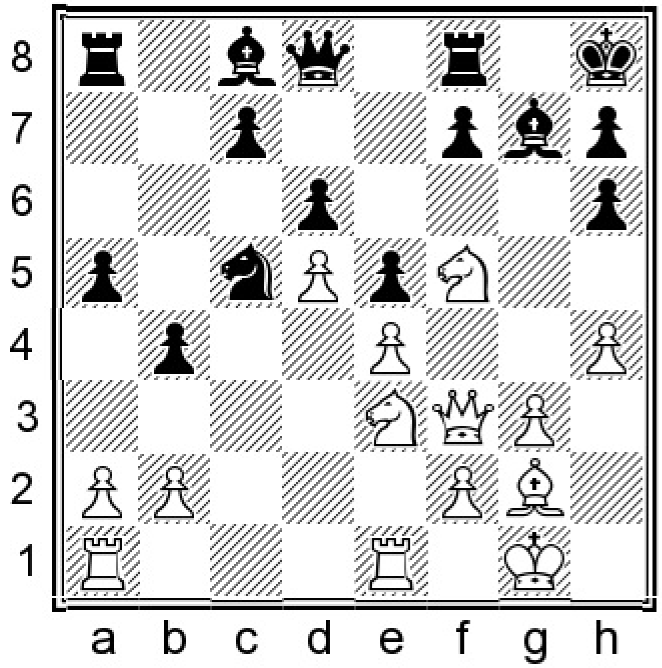
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.h4!

The start of a manoeuvre to activate the “sleeping” pieces, not expected by almost anyone.

18...Bf6 19.Nce3 Bc8 20.Qf3 Bg7



Exercise: The precedent regrouping made by Carlsen had a hidden link. What was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.Bh3!

Complementing 18.h4!. Vachier-Lagrave admitted he hadn’t anticipated this bishop manoeuvre.

21...Rg8

Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

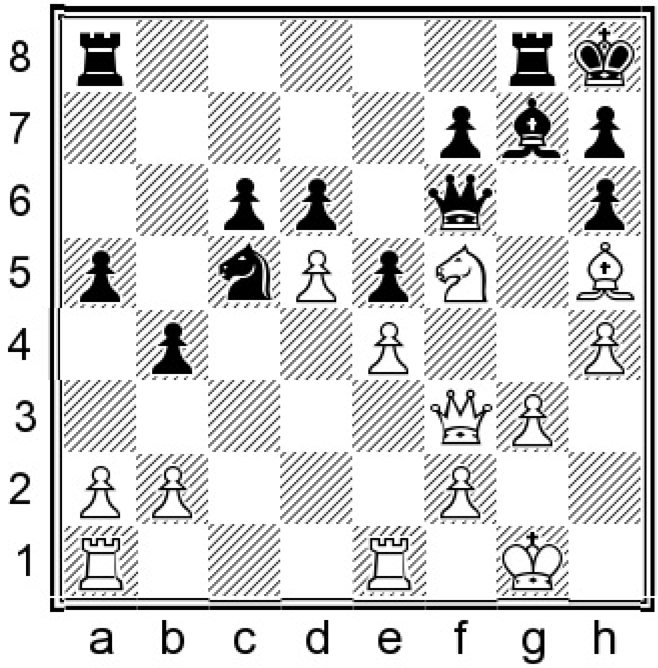
22.Bg4!

Heading to h5.

22...Qf6 23.Bh5

The bishop pressures f7, diminishing the mobility of the black forces. The next step will be to activate the rooks.

23...Bxf5 24.Nxf5 c6

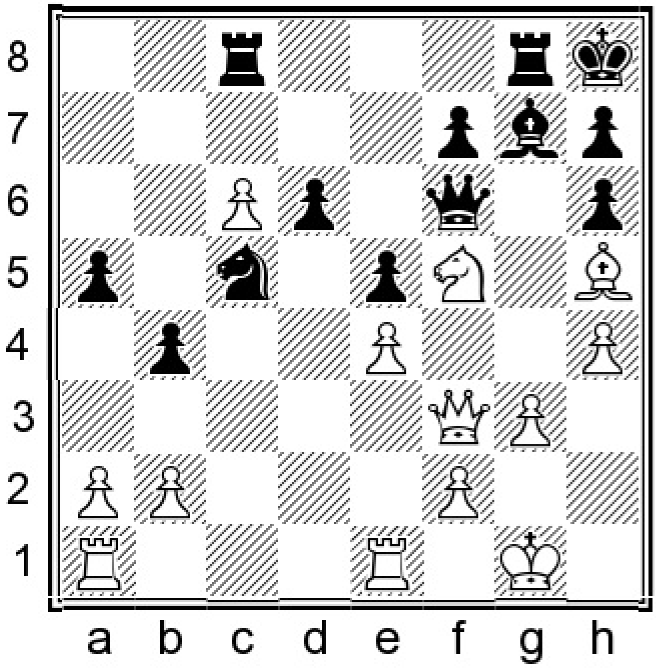


Question: I see Black got rid of his light-squared bishop to be able to play ...c6, is that the right idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black must do something to try to get counterplay. “If you don’t play this then you will lose at some moment because of Re3-f3,” said Carlsen. Vachier-Lagrave agreed and added “Even with Rg1, g4, and g5 at some point.”

25.dxc6 Rac8



Exercise: The situation has changed; it is necessary to adapt to the new circumstances. What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Qd1!

With a new regrouping, the queen heads to the strong point, d5, because 26...Nxe4 is bad due to 27.Bg4!

26...Rxc6 27.Qd5 Rgc8 28.Rad1 Bf8 29.Qxf7

29.Bxf7 was an alternative, and it was also strong, but Carlsen had to choose one way. White will have a lasting advantage in the ending.

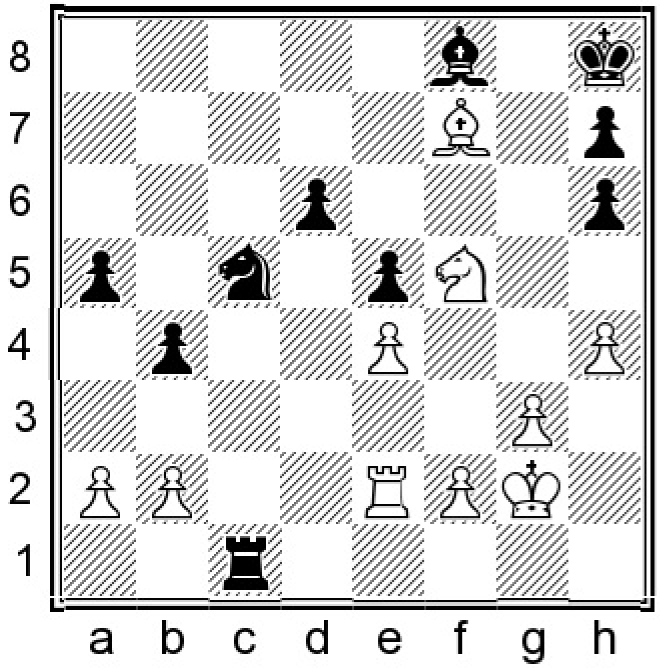
29...Qxf7 30.Bxf7

All the white pieces are better situated, without sacrificing material, and Black has weaknesses... it's an ideal situation.

30...Na4 31.Re2 Rc1 32.Rxc1 Rxc1+

Black wants to create counterplay with his remaining active rook after exchanging one pair of rooks, but all White's pieces are in a dominant position and will be able to neutralize it.

33.Kg2 Nc5



Exercise: White consolidated his advantage with his next move, which one?

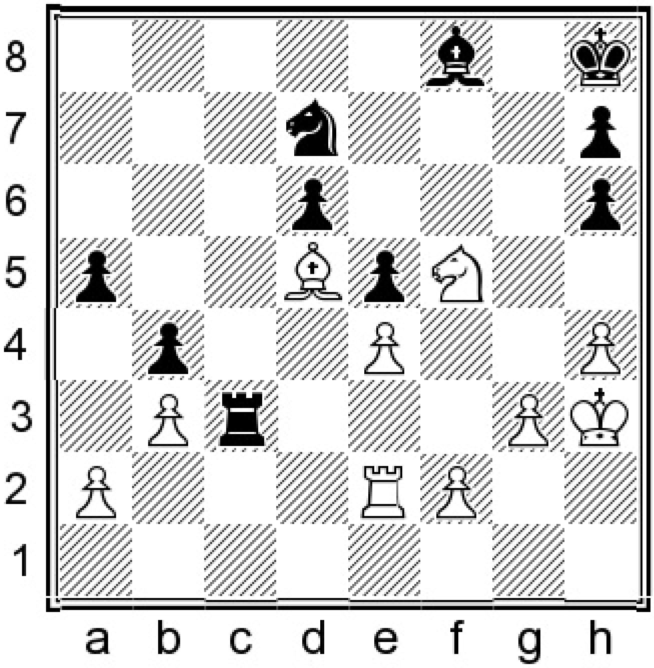
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34.b3!

"I was very happy to play this b3 because Black has no counterplay, although it is not that easy to win" (Carlsen). "I am playing without a bishop and a king," said Vachier-Lagrave, and he regarded his position as already very bad.

34...Rc3 35.Kh3 Nd7 36.Be6 Nc5 37.Bd5 Nd7



Exercise: Black didn’t allow the white king to enter the game, so how did White progress?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38.Ne3!

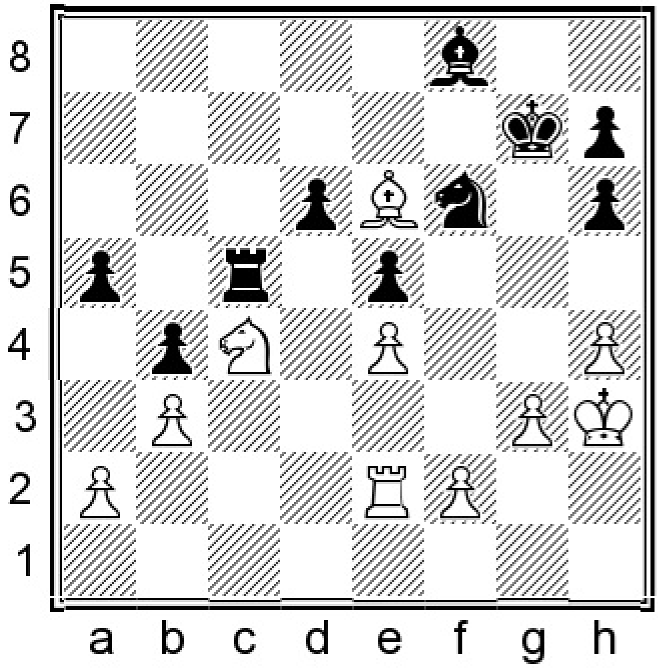
The knight optically had the ideal location on f5, but he heads to a new square that is even better, c4, pressing both the d6- and a5-pawns.

38...Nf6 39.Be6 Rc5

The e4-pawn was untouchable due to 40.Nd5.

40.Nc4 Kg7

Vachier-Lagrave also considered 40...a4, but both players agreed that after 41.bxa4 d5 42.Ne3 Black has insufficient counterplay. 42.Nxe5 is also strong.



Exercise: How did White improve his position?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

41.f3!

The white king is quite far away on h3, but even in positions with few pieces on the board tactical motifs are present. Carlsen wanted to improve the position of his king, so he initially thought about 41.Kg2 but then rejected it because of 41...Nxe4! 42.Rxe4 Kf6! 43.Bg8 d5 and White's advantage diminishes.

41...Ne8 42.Rd2 Nc7

Looking for counterplay before the enemy king enters the battle.

42...a4 was not enough, as after 43.Bd7 (not 43.bxa4? Nc7) 43...axb3 44.axb3 Nf6 45.Be6, followed by Ra2, as indicated by both players, the newly opened a-file favours only White.

43.Bg4 a4

If 43...Nb5 then simply 44.Nxa5.

44.Nxd6 Bxd6 45.Rxd6 a3

This advanced pawn on a3, and the attack on the a2-pawn, are the key points of black's counterchances, although he has to make concessions to make progress with them.

46.Bd7

The bishop controls the black knight while on his way to c6.

Vachier-Lagrave suggested a different way, also valid: 46.Rd7+ Kf8 47.Rxh7 Rc2 48.f4 exf4 49.gxf4 Nb5 50.e5 Rxa2 51.e6.

46...Rc2

The only chance to complicate the game consists of capturing the a2-pawn, as we have said, even if it is necessary to sacrifice the knight.

47.Bc6 Rxa2

If 47...Na6 then 48.Bd5.

48.Rd7+ Kf6

48...Kf8 49.Rxc7 Rc2 50.Kg4 a2 51.Ra7 is hopeless, too.

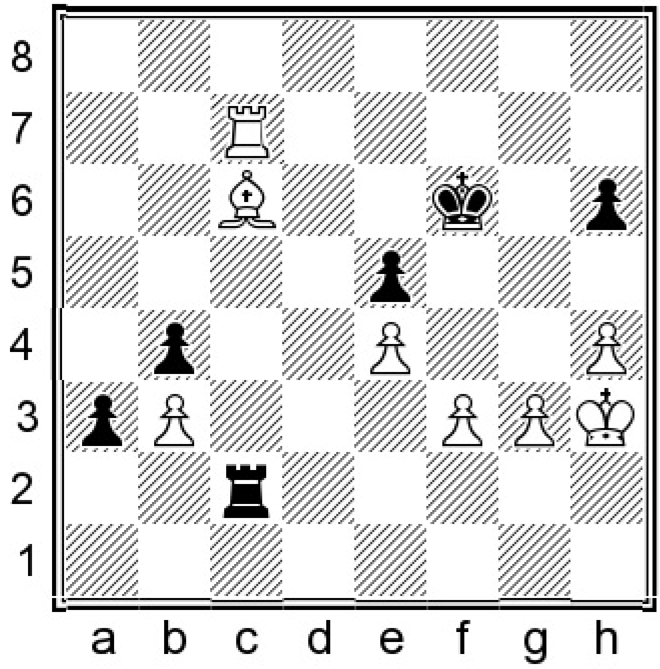
49.Rxc7 Rc2 50.Rxh7! Kg6

50...Rxc6 obviously loses to 51.Rxh6+.

51.Rc7

As in the line mentioned, White waits for ...a2 to answer Ra7, with a won rook ending.

51...Kf6



Exercise: There are several strong moves, which do you think Carlsen chose?

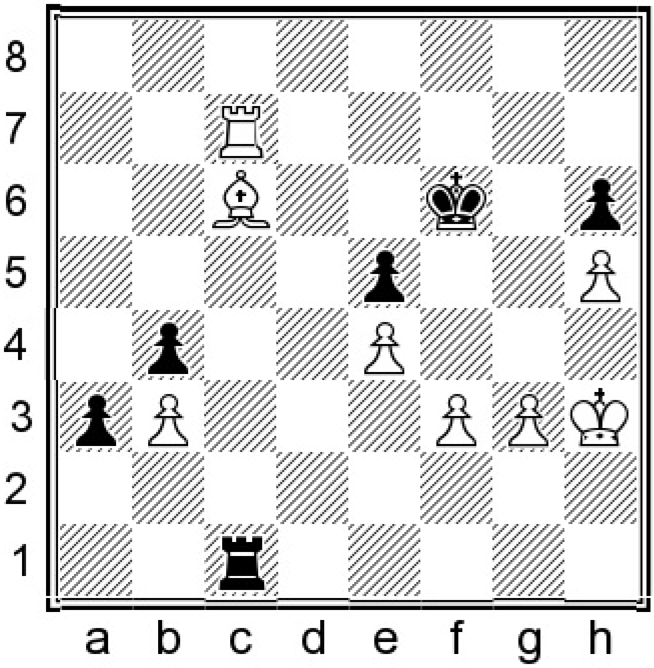
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

52.h5!

Creating a beautiful mating net. The first step is to prevent 52...Kg6.

52...Rc1



Exercise: Black is ready to play ...a2 and win the rook, so what was Carlsen's idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

53.Rh7!

White unpins the bishop because 53...Rxc6 loses to 54.Rxh6+.

53...a2 54.Bd5

Mate follows: 54...a1=Q 55.Rf7+ Kg5 56.Rf5#

1–0

Again, Carlsen left the well-trodden paths early, this time very early. He sacrificed a pawn for the initiative, and the game finished in a mating attack, and a very unusual one at that, after a long battle, even with very little material on the board. “To play interesting chess and win on the same day, you can get nothing better than that! I am very happy,” was Carlsen’s synopsis of the game.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It is useful to know the typical plans for your chosen setup and see if they work in the game situation. (9.d5! 11.Re1!)

2.) Tactical elements are everywhere, and they are essential to improve the position. (14.Bg5! 15.Bh6!)

3.) “What is my opponent’s next move or plan?” is a question that can help us find our own best answer. (41.f3! *41.*K*g2?*)

4.) “How can I improve the position of my pieces?” This is another question which, posed at the right moment, can give us clues on how to find the best move. (21.Bh3! 22.Bg4! 23.Bh5! 38.Ne3!)

4.) Don’t lose the chance to profit from any weakness in the opponent’s kingside. (52.h5!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 16

Magnus Carlsen – Hikaru Nakamura

Slav Defence [D11]

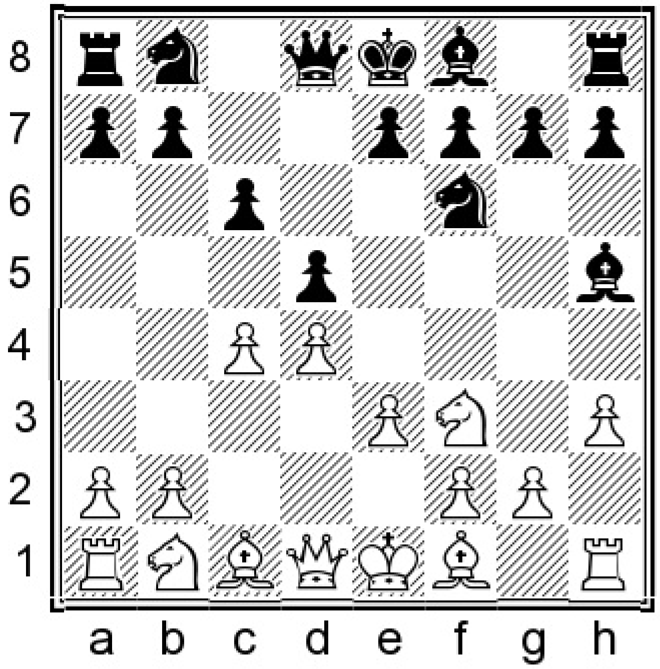
London, (7), 11.12.2015

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.e3 Bg4

Nakamura was the tournament leader with only three rounds to go, and Carlsen had not won a single game in the previous six rounds.

Naturally, a draw would have been very welcome for Nakamura, and here he deviated from his more usual 4...a6.

5.h3 Bh5



6.cxd5

Question: Why go for this exchange? It eliminates the central tension...

Show/Hide Solution

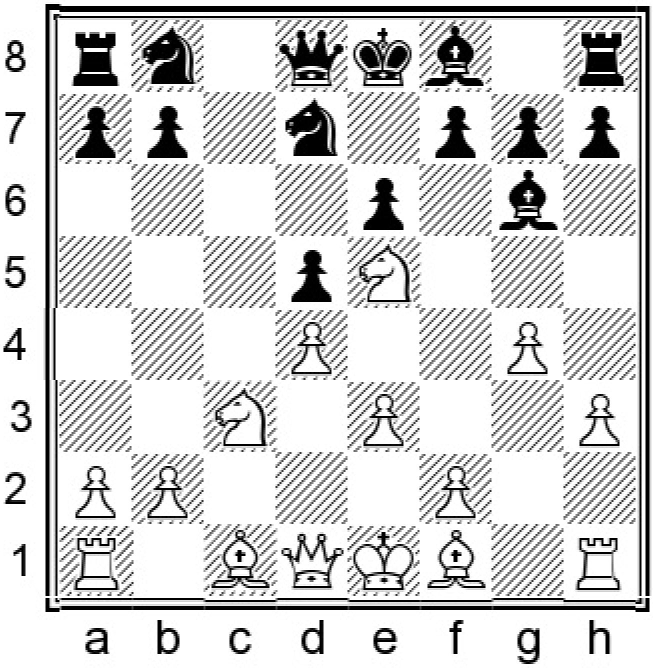
Answer: For practical reasons, this is rarely seen and the main purpose is to neutralize all possible preparation by Nakamura for this game.

As we know, Carlsen doesn’t fear playing quiet positions and endings close to equality.

6...cxd5

A different idea is to play 6...Bxf3, followed by 7...cxd5 and ...Nc6.

7.Nc3 e6 8.g4 Bg6 9.Ne5 Nfd7

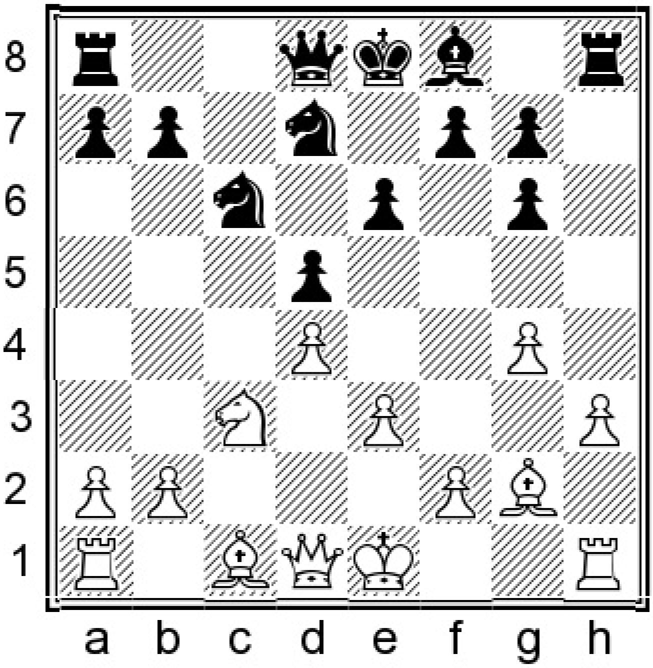


Question: Why move this already developed piece? Isn't it better to develop the b8-knight?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: In normal conditions it would be better to continue with development, but here, after 7.cxd5 cxd5, the b8-knight has an ideal position on c6. There was a similar idea in Game 9.

10.Nxg6 hxg6 11.Bg2 Nc6



12.e4

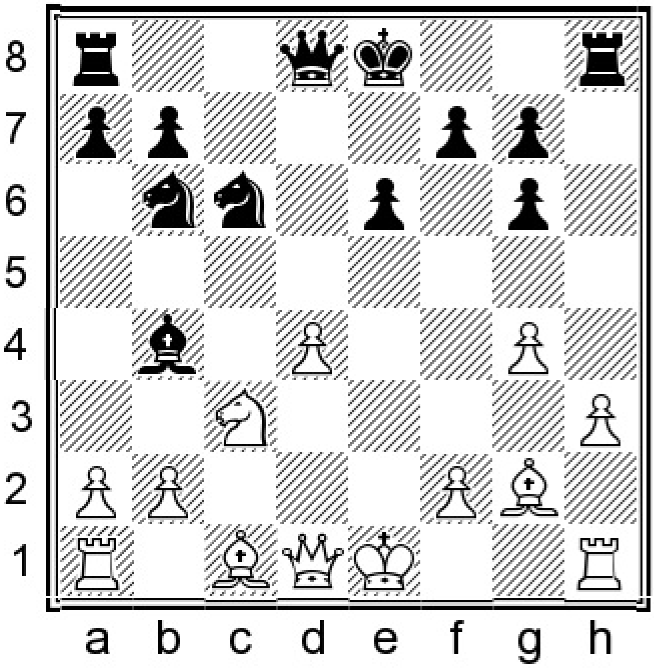
Question: What a surprise! Is it good to voluntarily create an isolated d-pawn here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is not worrisome because the d5 advance is intended, and after that the two bishops will be stronger than before the opening of the diagonals, although, as we shall see on move 15, it is not so easy to carry out the pawn push. Another reason for this move is that the natural 12.0-0 may be answered by 12...f5, and the two bishops would be less active. This happened in Tregubov – Anand, Corsica 2014.

Anyway, Black is still fine after 12.e4, so 11...f5 was possible but not necessary, as Nielsen pointed out.

12...dxe4 13.Nxe4 Bb4+ 14.Nc3 Nb6



15.0-0

Question: Is it a good idea here to sacrifice the d4-pawn? 15...Nxd4 16.Bxb7 Rxh3 looks scary, because after 17.Bxa8 Qxa8 I don't see a good defence. Why not simply play 15.Be3?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right in the line you mention. Taking the exchange on a8 would be a death sentence, however, Carlsen would play 17.Bg2, and depending on where the h3-rook retreats, he would play 18.Bf4 or 18.Be3, with Re1 and/or Rc1 planned. Black cannot castle and White's play is more harmonious. White would have more than decent compensation for the pawn.

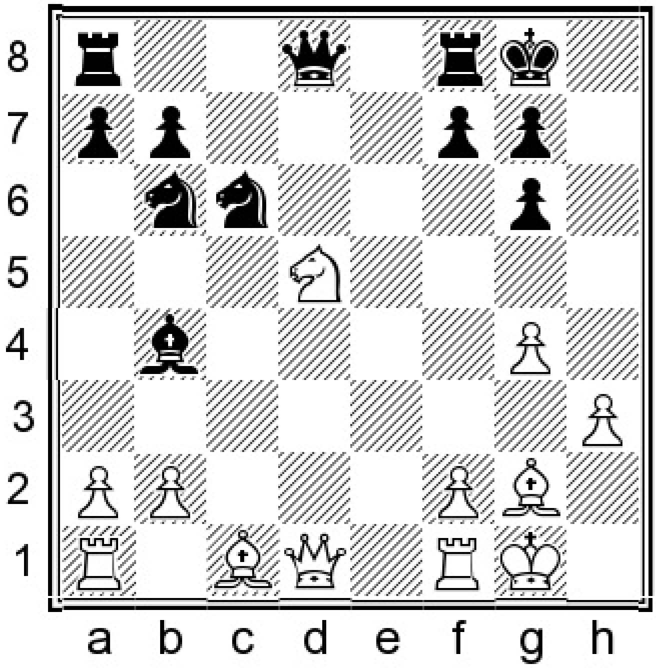
15.Be3 was possible, of course, but the advance d5 would take more time that way. There could follow 15...Rc8, with the possibility of continuing 16...Bxc3 and ...Na5. Carlsen didn't want to choose yet the position of the c1-bishop.

15...0-0

In this game we can clearly see the importance of the practical element in the fight. Nakamura's main purpose was to maintain his leadership and was following a drawing strategy. Of course he would have liked to win, but he did not want to reach a complex position where he could also lose, rather preferring simple positions that were closer to a draw.

With 15...Nd5 Black could have stopped the following break. After 16.Nxd5 exd5 17.Qb3 both sides have isolated pawns, but the d5-pawn is weaker than the d4-pawn.

16.d5 exd5 17.Nxd5



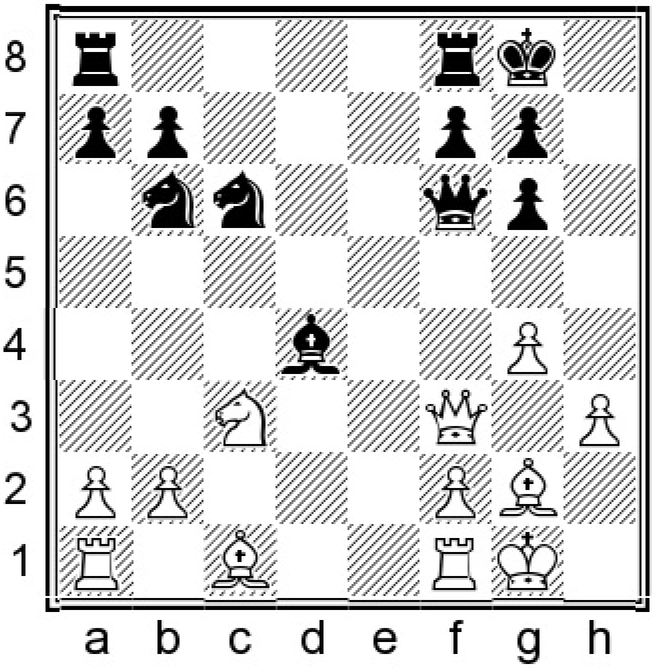
17...Bc5

Question: If Black wanted to simplify the position, wasn't it better to choose 17...Nxd5 18.Qxd5 Qxd5 19.Bxd5 Rfd8?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It was a good alternative, yes, although after 20.Rd1 Ne7 21.Bf3 White has a pleasant position, and he could play with his pair of bishops for free.

18.Nc3 Bd4 19.Qf3 Qf6?!



Question: Why is this dubious? Exchanging queens was good before, why is it not now?

Show/Hide Solution

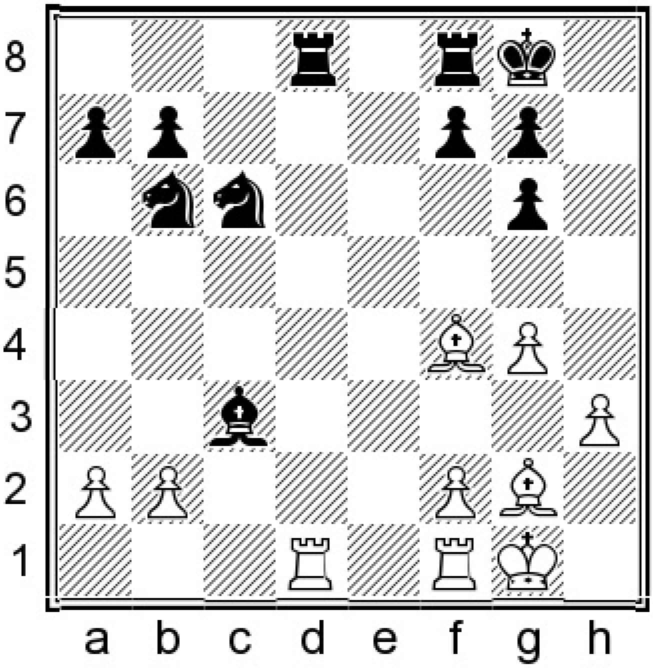
Answer: Because this exchange is made in better conditions for White than before. His pieces will go to better squares than in the position commented on at move 15.

It would have been preferable to exchange queens before, as you suggested, or now play 19...Qe7 followed by ...Rad8, ...Rfe8, etc. Nonetheless, objectively, Black’s position is still fine.

20.Qxf6 Bxf6 21.Bf4 Rad8 22.Rad1

White has what he wanted, an ending with the bishop pair and a long fight ahead.

22...Bxc3



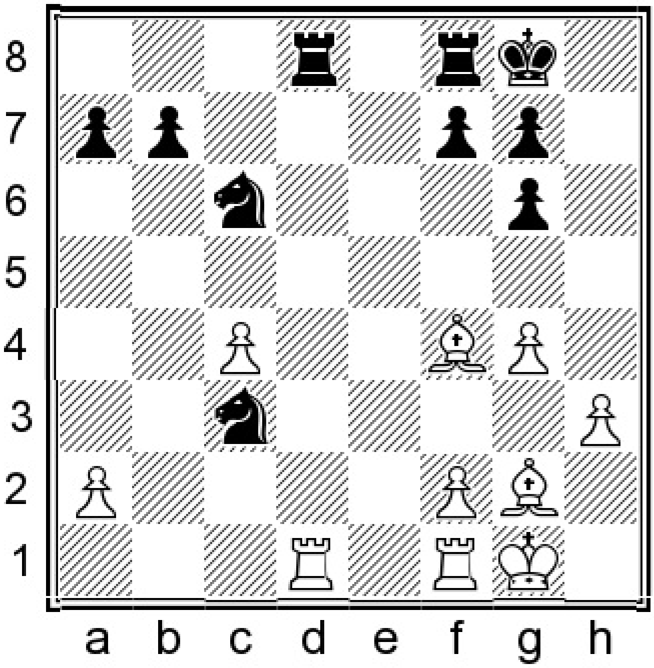
Question: Why does he go for this exchange?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black didn’t want to continue waiting for White’s slow progress, playing, for example, the offered rook-swaps on the d-file, which would surely be very pleasant for White.

So Nakamura decided to unbalance the pawn structure, creating two isolated pawns, but giving up his remaining bishop.

23.bxc3 Na4 24.c4 Nc3



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply to the double attack?

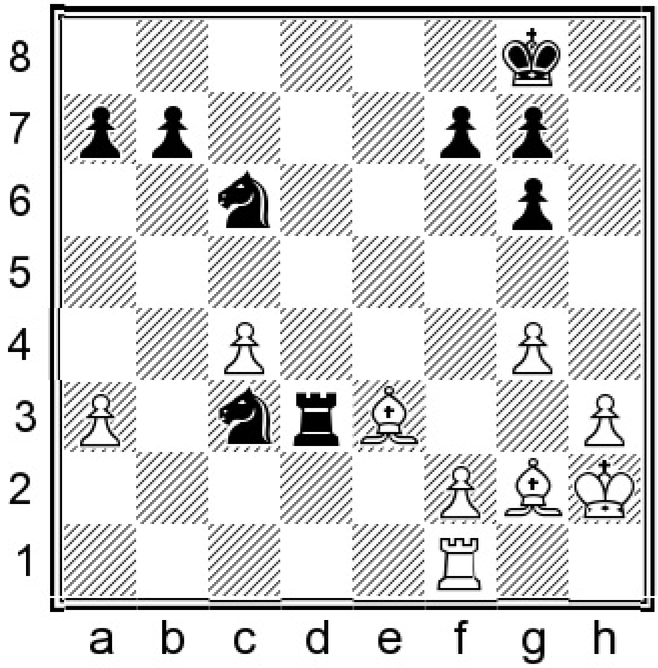
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25.Rd2!

Defending both the e2-square, and, indirectly, the attacked a2-pawn as well, because 25...Rxd2 26.Bxd2 Nxa2? loses to 27.Bxc6 bxc6 28.Ra1.

25...Rxd2 26.Bxd2 Ne2+ 27.Kh2 Rd8 28.Be3 Nc3 29.a3 Rd3



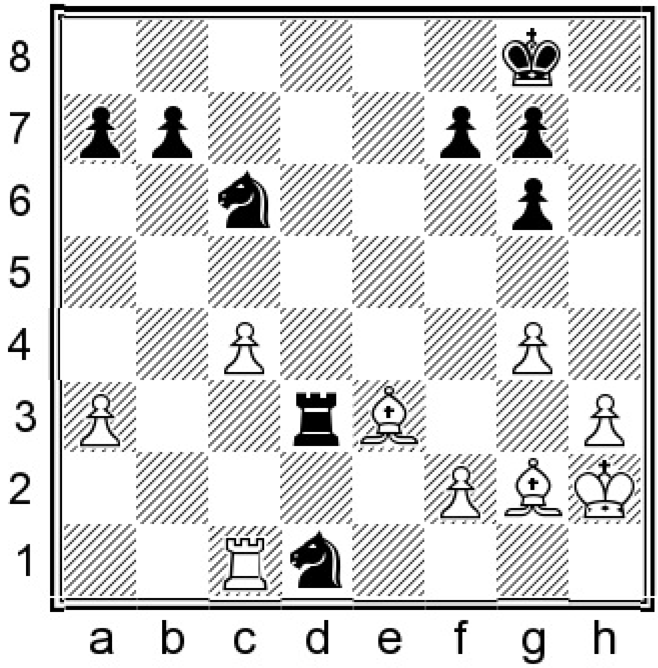
30.Rc1

Question: Why not take the pawn, playing the obvious 30.Bxc6 and 31.Bxa7?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It was possible, but the extra pawn is rather useless for now: play might continue 30.Bxc6 bxc6 31.Bxa7 f6, followed by ...Kf7. Even after 32.Re1 Black can play 32...Kf7, without fearing 33.Bc5 due to 33...Na4! White prefers to retain the tension.

30...Nd1



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.Be4

First expelling the d3-rook from his useful position.

It is better than playing the immediate 31.Bc5, as 31...Rd2 32.Kg3 Rd3+ is rather unpleasant.

31...Rd7

The rook cautiously moves to d7, dealing with 32.Bxc6 and 33.Bxa7.

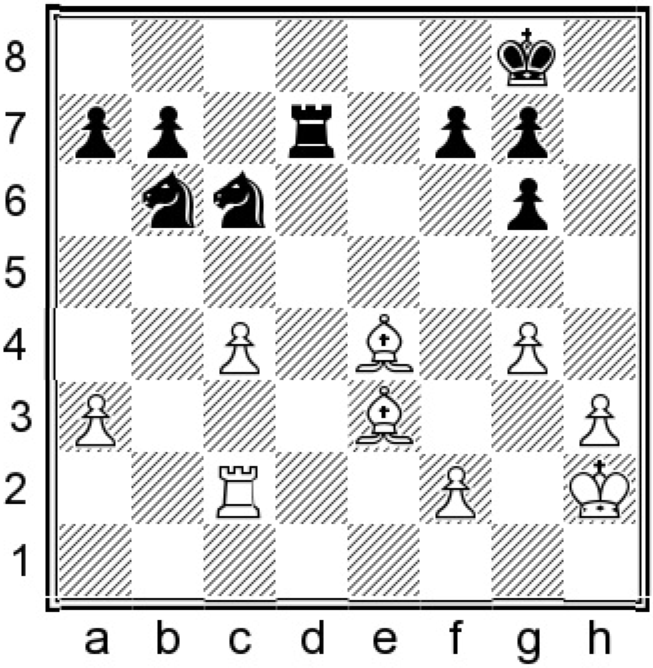
32.Bc5 Nb2

If 32...Rd2 then 33.Kg3 is fine.

33.Rc2 Na4 34.Be3

Black had to withdraw his pieces from the active squares and the bishop pair allow White to try to continue improving his position, so this is an ideal scenario for Carlsen.

34...Nb6



Exercise: There will be a moment when White will need to stop manoeuvring and take concrete decisions. Is this one of them? What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

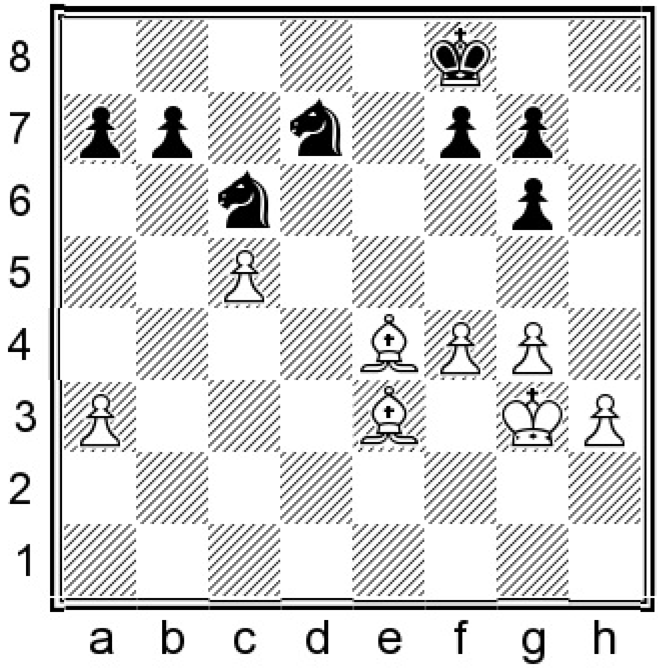
35.c5!

He decides to continue manoeuvring, rejecting 35.Bxb6 axb6 36.Rb2, which is attractive. After e.g. 36...Rd4 37.Bd5 Na5 38.Rxb6 Nxc4 39.Bxc4 Rxc4 40.Rxb7 Ra4, the phrase “All rook endings are a draw” doesn’t completely apply: White could continue playing “for two results” but Carlsen wants more. Five years after the game, this is also the first choice of the stronger engines.

35...Nd5 36.Rd2 Nf6 37.Rxd7

This exchange was what Carlsen had in mind when he played 35.c5. He trusts his two bishops to continue pressing permanently.

37...Nxd7 38.Kg3 Kf8 39.f4



Question: You mentioned the bishop pair as White's main trump card, but the pair of knights seem to be capable of holding the position.

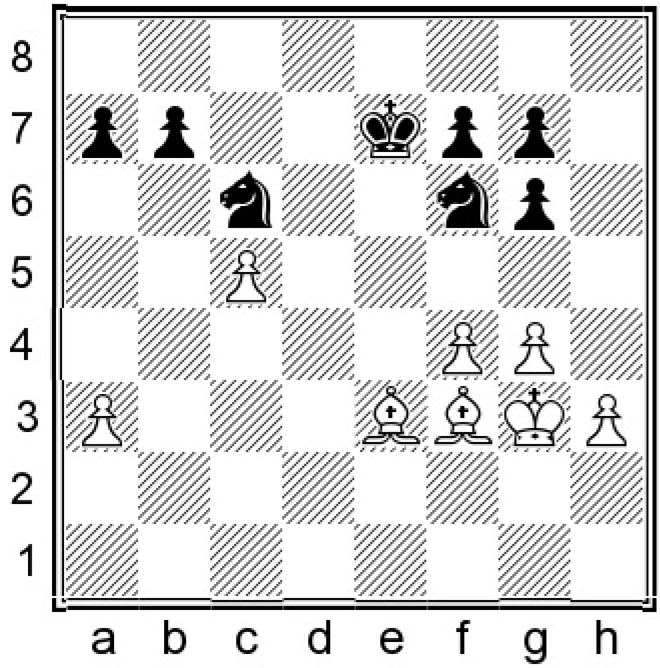
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It's true that the bishop pair by itself doesn't guarantee anything, so White needs to create new ways to improve his position. This is the first step to opening lines of attack, and it is a good decision.

Curiously, at the press conference after the game Carlsen (exhausted) believed this advance was imprecise because it forced White to make more compromising moves, as we shall see.

He considered it was better to first play the flexible 39.Bd5.

39...Nf6 40.Bf3 Ke7



Exercise: Time-control has been reached, and now Carlsen has time to consider a new plan of action; what did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Nielsen commented: “For a start, it’s hard to see how White can improve his position, and the next move in many ways looks like worsening it!”

41.f5!

Question: I thought exchanging pawns favours the defending side, and after this White even finishes with four isolated pawns, why is this good?

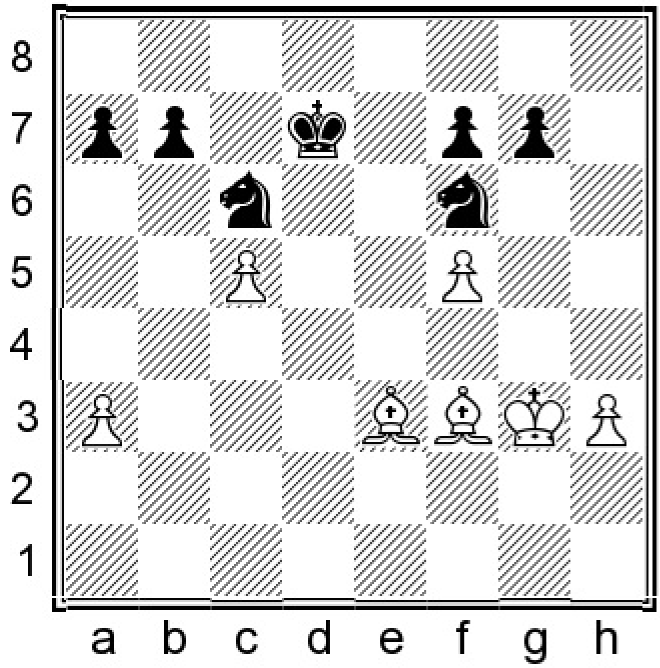
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Your assertion is only partially correct. White gets something too, open lines of attack, and the possibility to gain more space and squares, particularly for his king. Before this advance the king had no clear purpose, but now he can proceed further up the board and act as a strong piece.

41...gxf5 42.gxf5

As Nielsen pointed out, Black constantly has to be on his guard to neutralize Bxc6 followed by Bg5, and after the withdrawal of Black’s king White can continue Bxf6, creating a passed h-pawn. That said, right now this is not a threat, as after ...Kf8 Bxf6 gxf6 the ending is drawn because the black king is in time with his counterplay on the h-file, while the white king moves to a5.

42...Kd7



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen proceed?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

43.Kf4

As we know, the king was the piece that benefited the most after the f5 advance, so he enters the fight.

43...Ne8 44.Kg5

The king advances without fearing 44...f6+ because of 45.Kh5, threatening 46.Bxc6+ followed by 47.Kg6.

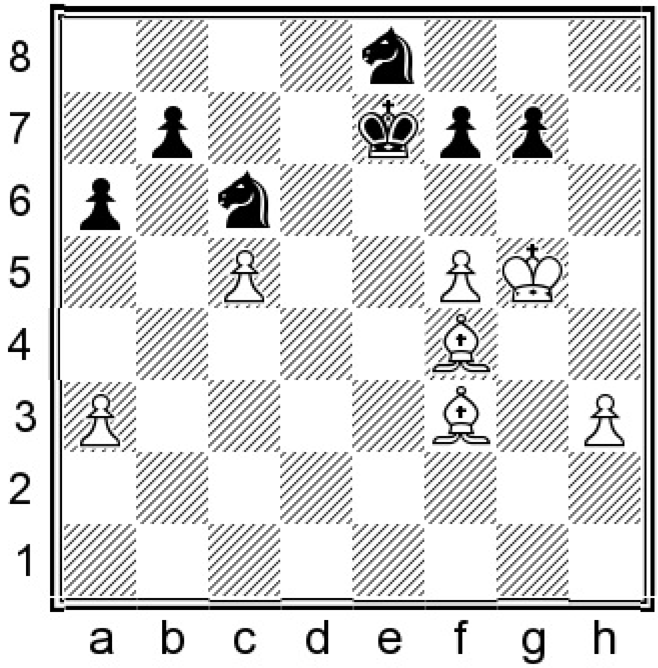
44...Ke7

If 44...Nf6 then White continues progressing with 45.h4.

45.Bf4

White is preparing to infiltrate on d6 with his bishop.

45...a6



Exercise (simple): How did White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

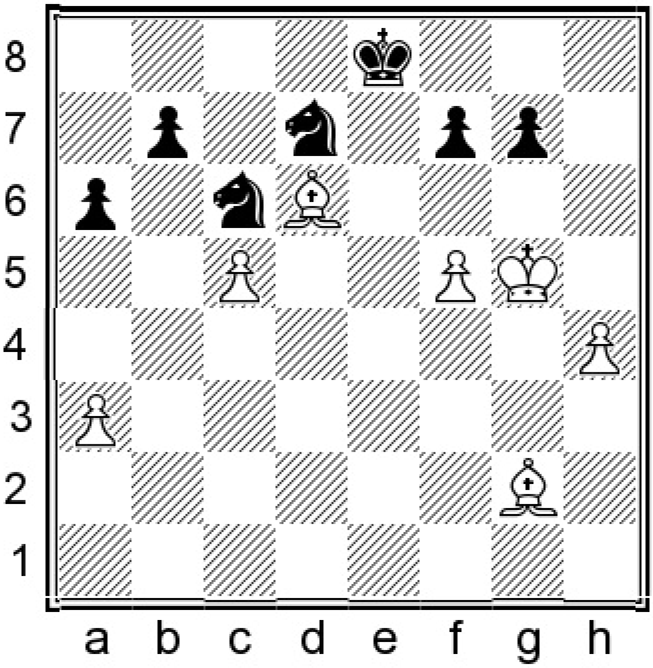
46.h4

The h-pawn should play a crucial role to open lines at the right moment.

46...Kf8

Both sides manoeuvre for a few moves, waiting for White’s next steps.

47.Bg3 Nf6 48.Bd6+ Ke8 49.Kf4 Nd7 50.Bg2 Kd8 51.Kg5 Ke8



Exercise (simple): One bishop has returned to d6, and the other moved to a safer place, g2, away from a possible ...Ne5 attack... what next?

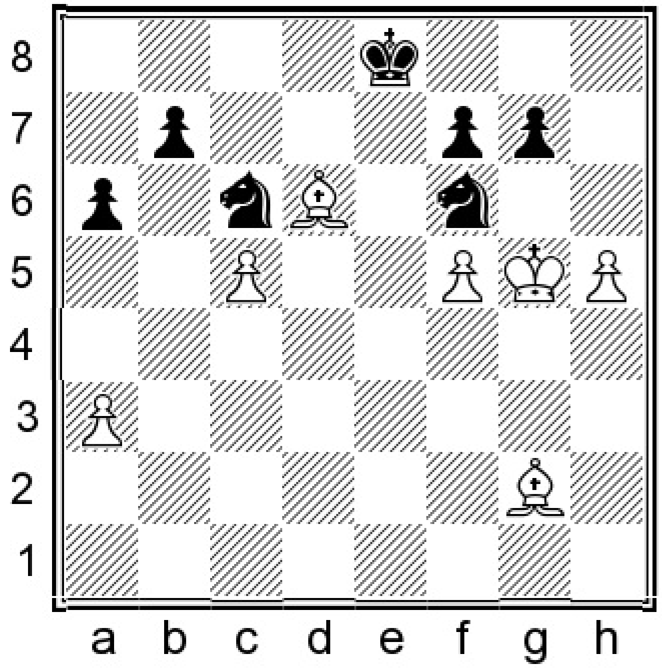
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

52.h5

This was the idea, White continues to make slight improvements to his position with natural moves, but the phase where tactical accuracy is also necessary will arrive soon.

52...Nf6



Exercise: What did Carlsen play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

53.h6!

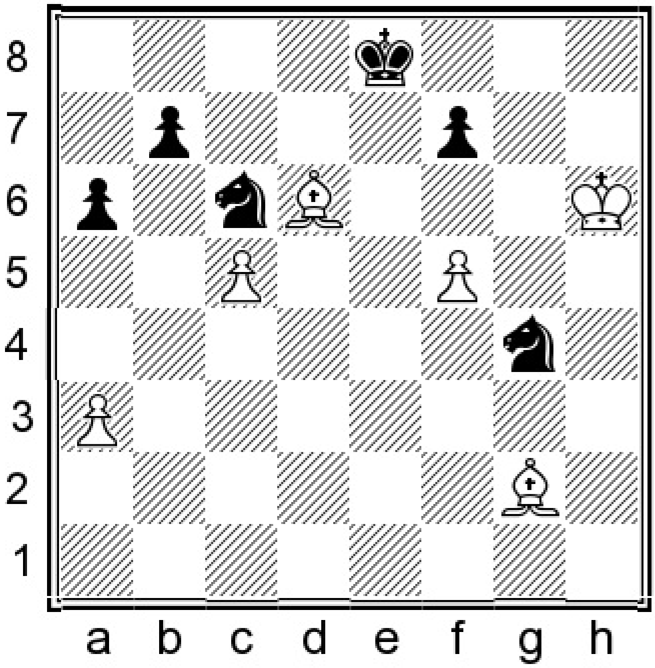
The manoeuvre 53.Bxc6+ bxc6 54.Be5 was not enough now because of 54...Nh7+! (the only move) followed by ...f6 and Black's position is a fortress.

White exchanges a pawn again, but Black loses the solid position for his knight on f6 and the white king gets more ways to infiltrate. Nonetheless, we should note that 53.h6 is a pawn sacrifice.

53...Nh7+ 54.Kh5 Nf6+ 55.Kg5 Nh7+ 56.Kh4!

This was the idea; the pawn will soon be recovered.

56...gxh6 57.Kh5 Nf6+ 58.Kxh6 Ng4+



Exercise (simple): Black has got activity for his knights, so which is the best square for Carlsen to retreat the king to?

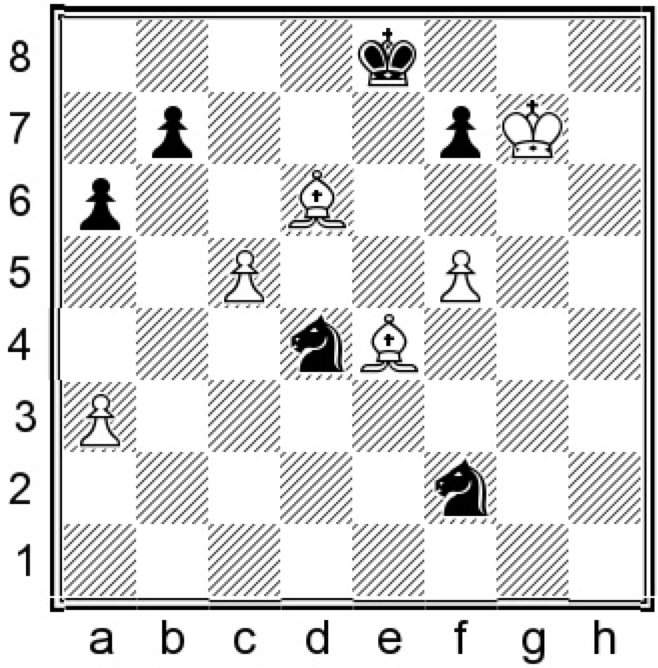
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

59.Kg7!

Leaving the f-pawn alone, but Carlsen considered the activity of the black knights could be controlled, his king is ideally situated on g7, and in fact the f5-pawn is now stronger thanks to the king’s help. The immediate threat is 60.Bd5.

59...Nd4 60.Be4 Nf2



Exercise (simple): What must the light-squared bishop do?

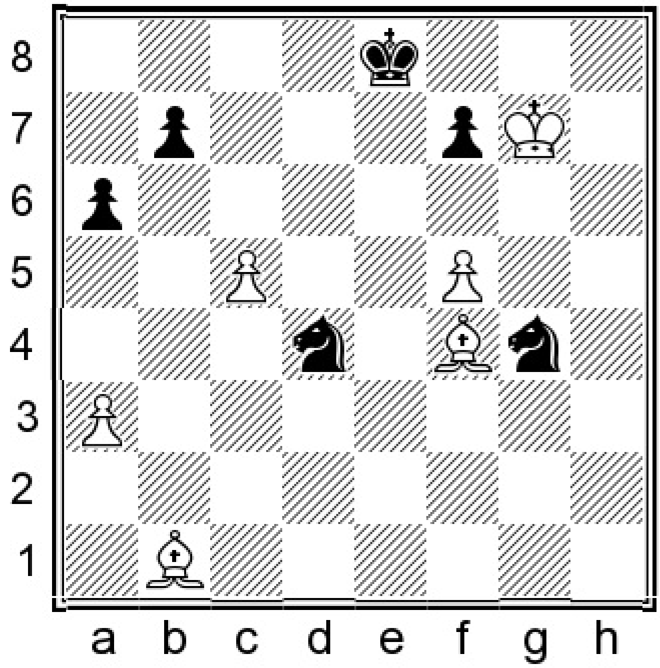
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

61.Bb1

The bishop must continue defending the f5-pawn, and even better from this safe square. Nothing would be gained after 61.Bxb7? Nxf5+ 62.Kf6 Nxd6 63.cxd6 Kd7 64.Ke5 Nd3+ 65.Kd4 Nf4, and the d6-pawn is not dangerous.

61...Ng4 62.Bf4



62...f6?!

A critical decision. Now the f5-pawn is fixed, so Black obtains a target, but this move also creates more weaknesses. Anyway, it is not easy to suggest a clear improvement. Nielsen mentioned that Black didn't get anything harassing the bishops, e.g.: 62...Ne2 63.Bc7 Nc3 64.Bc2 Ne3 65.Bd3, and Black's chances are no better.

Exercise: How did White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

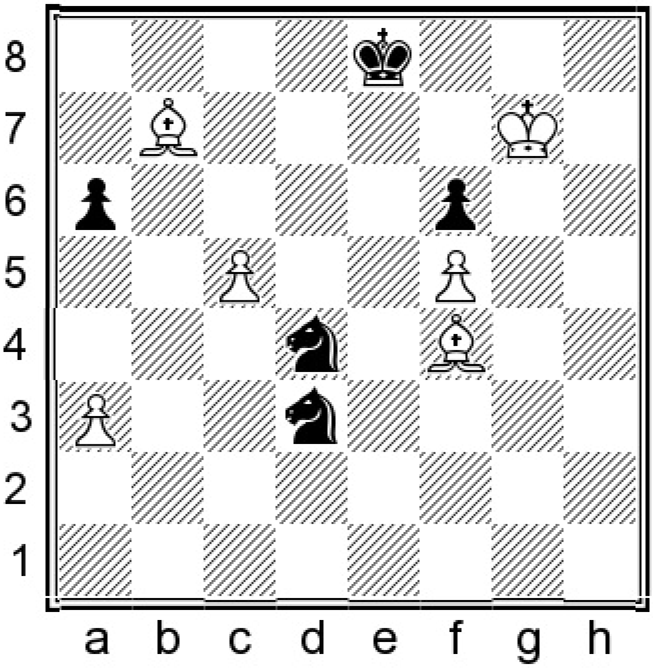
63.Be4!

The time to create a passed pawn has arrived. White's bishop is not on d6, so the line mentioned on move 61 is not valid here. However, this is only one part of the picture, which is more complex than it looks.

63...Nf2 64.Bb1

Repeating moves to gain time on the clock.

64...Ng4 65.Be4 Nf2 66.Bxb7! Nd3



After a long fight, already lasting six hours, we could say that, in a way, the situation has certain similarities to what we had at move 23. White presses with his bishop pair, he has made clear progress, but there is very little material left and a draw seems the most likely result.

Exercise: The tactical part is very important. What had Carlsen in mind when he chose 63.Be4! followed by Bxb7?

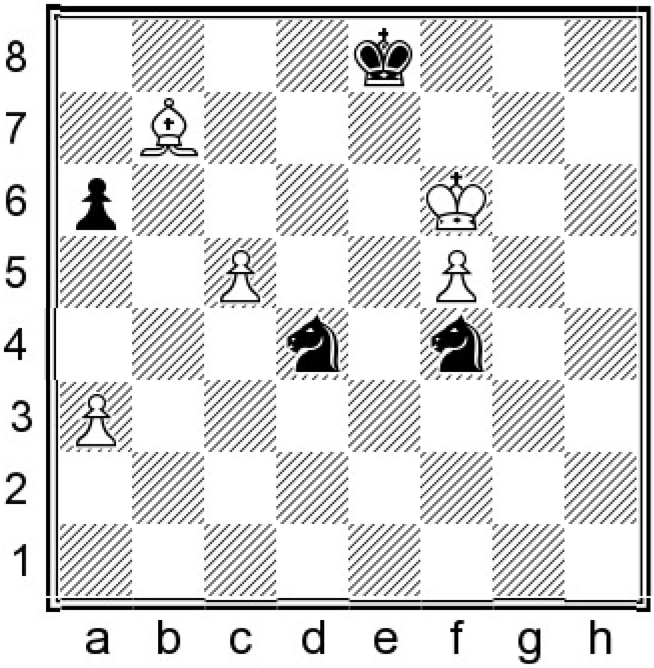
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

67.Kxf6!!

This bishop sacrifice is the only winning path. Even the stronger engines in mid-2019 initially gave 67.Bd6? as also winning after 67...Nxf5+ 68.Kxf6 Nxd6 69.Bc6+ Kd8 70.cxd6, which would have been a logical result, except for 70...Nb2!, and after 71.Ke6 Nc4 72.a4 a5 73.Kd5 Ne3+ 74.Kc5 Ng4 Nielsen gave this main line: 75.Kb6 Ne5 76.Bb5 Nf7, where Black holds, because 77.d7 Ne5 78.Kxa5 Nxd7 is a draw. In April 2020 the engines already see that Carlsen's choice is the best.

67...Nxf4



Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

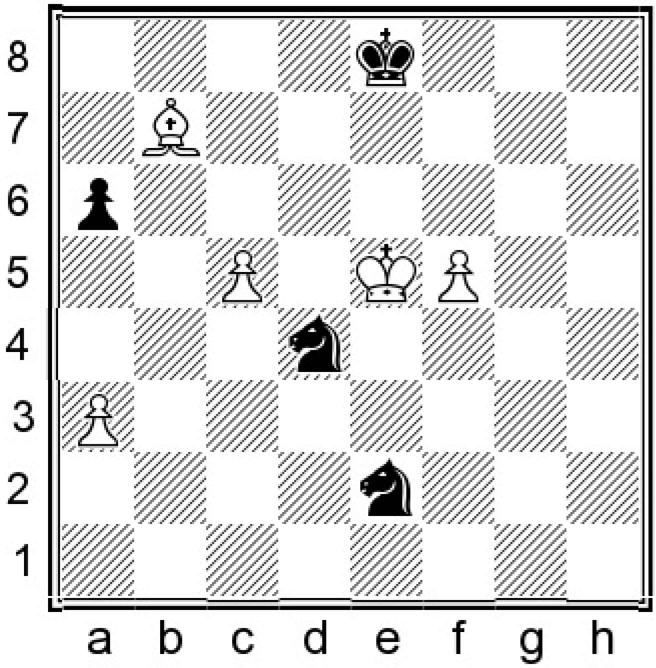
Answer:

68.Ke5!

The king retreats, yes, but to attack both knights, limiting their mobility. Then it will be easier for White to advance the pawns.

68...Nfe2

There is nothing better, as 68...Nde2 69.Bxa6 leaves the knights tied up and unable to stop the pawns. Meanwhile, returning the piece by playing 68...Nxf5 69.Kxf5 Nd3 70.c6 Kd8 71.Bxa6 gives White an easy win. In these and other lines it is important that White maintains the “good pawn” for his bishop. After the move chosen by Nakamura it was possible to play 69.Bxa6, which Carlsen considered, but he thought it was simpler to advance his free pawns.



69.f6?

This choice could have spoiled all the preceding work.

69.c6! was winning. If 69...Kd8 then 70.f6, so Black has to return the piece to try to resist. After 69...Nxc6+ 70.Bxc6+ Kf8 White manages to maintain his f-pawn and capture the only remaining black-pawn. 71.Be4 wins and so does 71.Kd6.

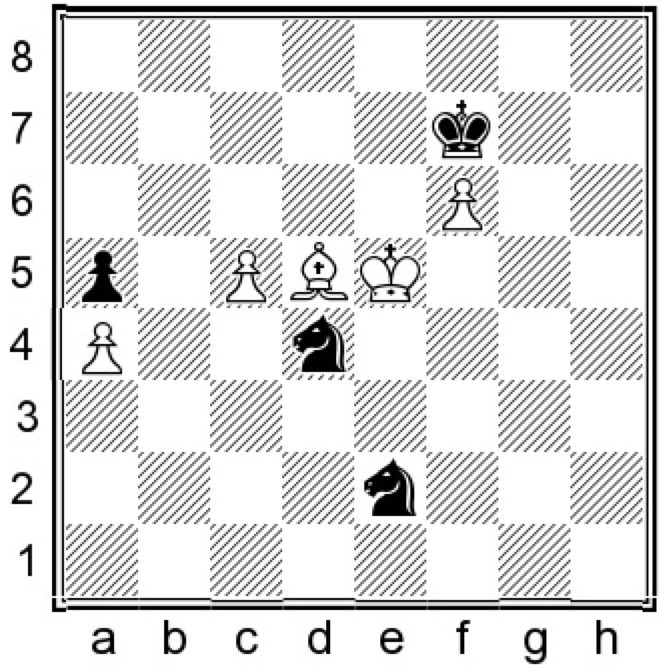
Let's look at the line mentioned by Nielsen: 71.Bd5 Nc3 72.Bc4 a5. The difference with the game is that here the pawns are still on a3 and f5, which makes the defence of these pawns easier.

White wins after 73.Kd4 Nd1 74.a4 Ke7 (now 74...Nb2 75.Bb3 Ke7 76.Kc3 Nxa4+ 77.Bxa4 Kf6 doesn't save the day because the bishop can defend the f5-pawn) 75.Bb3 Nf2 76.Kc5 Kf6 77.Be6, capturing the a5-pawn.

69...a5 70.a4

Controlling b5. If 70.c6 immediately then 70...Nb5 and it is a draw.

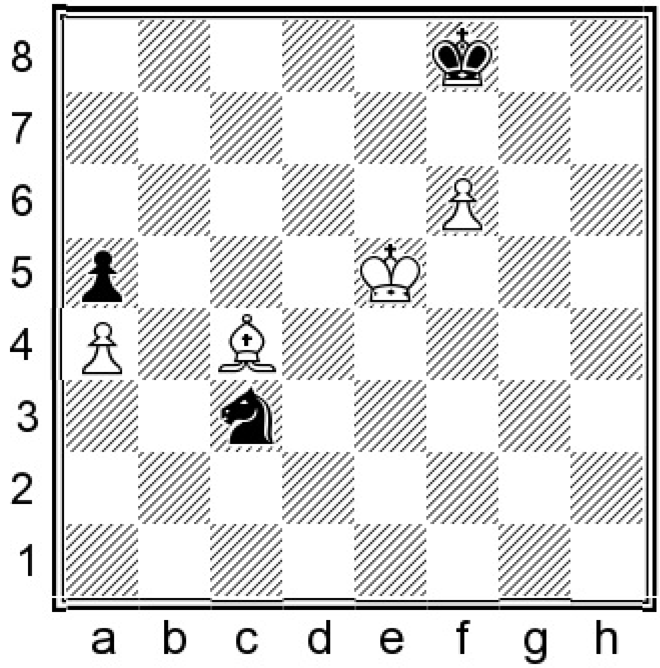
70...Kf7 71.Bd5+



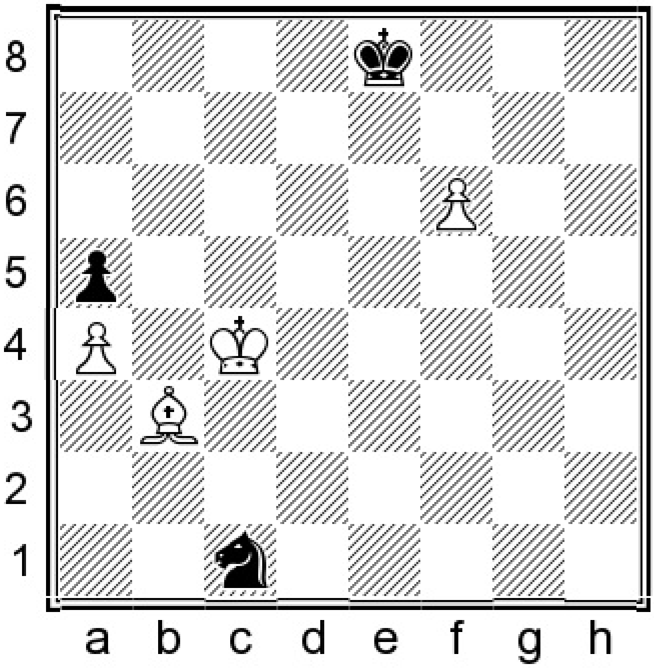
71...Kf8??

Nakamura was also very tired and returned the favour. It was necessary to play 71...Kg6!, maintaining the attack on the f6-pawn. Now, unlike after 69.c6!, it cannot be defended by the bishop.

“It is amazing that 72.c6 doesn’t win,” commented Carlsen after the game. After 72...Nxc6+ 73.Bxc6 Kf7 74.Bd5+ Kf8 75.Bc4 Nc3 the a4-pawn is attacked, stopping White from going to capture the a5-pawn with his king, because when White’s king is far enough Black plays ...Nxa4 followed by ...Kf7.



Let’s continue a little more: 76.Bb3 Ke8 77.Kd4 Ne2+ 78.Kc4 (or 78.Kc5 Nc3, threatening to take on a4, followed by ...Kf7 as we said) and now Black has 78...Nc1!.



If 79.Bc2 then 79...Kf7 80.Kb5 Ne2! 81.Kxa5 Nc3 and draw, while in the pawn ending after 79.Kc3 Nxb3 80.Kxb3 Kf7 81.Kc4 Kxf6 82.Kb5 Ke7 83.Kxa5 Kd7, the king gets to c8 in time.

Exercise: Black missed a great saving opportunity. Now Carlsen uses up almost all his time left, just two minutes, to implement the winning plan. How did he continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

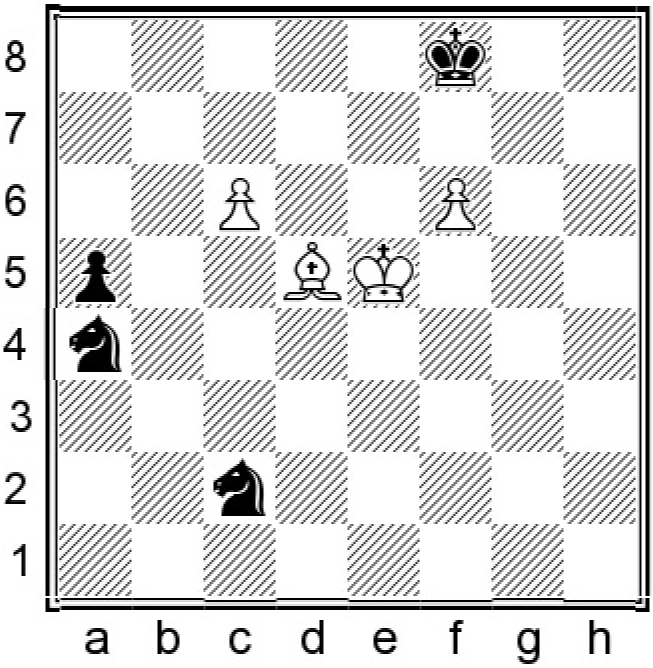
72.Ke4!

The idea is to play 73.Ke3 and then 74.Bc4, winning.

72...Nc2 73.c6 Nc3+ 74.Ke5

Threatening 75.c7.

74...Nxa4



Exercise (simple): What did Carlsen play?

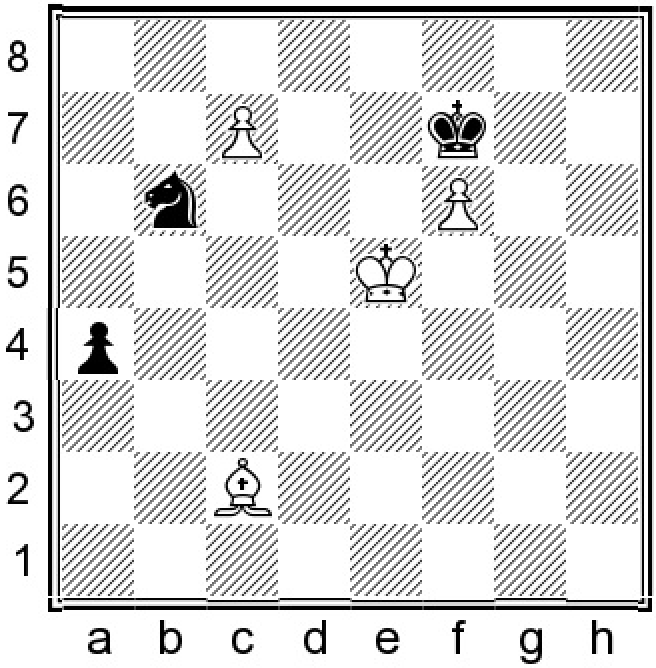
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

75.Bb3

Recovering the piece and, even more importantly, retaining both passed pawns.

75...Nb6 76.Bxc2 a4 77.c7 Kf7



78.Bxa4

The idea is to continue with 79.Bb3+ followed by 80.Be6, and White soon queens, e.g., 78...Nc4+ 79.Kd5 Nb6+ 80.Kc5! Nc8 (or 80...Nxa4+ 81.Kc6) 81.Bd7 Na7 82.Kb6.

After seven hours Nakamura resigned.

1–0

In this titanic struggle Carlsen quickly changed the central structure. He voluntary created an isolated d-pawn for himself: ambitiously, in search for the initiative, with the help of his two bishops.

Carlsen had a "must win" situation, and in a very long and exhausting fight he finally succeeded. His two bishops were stronger than the knight pair, but it was not easy at all, and mistakes were unavoidable.

This victory helped Carlsen to recover terrain and he finally won the London tourney and also the Grand Chess Tour 2015.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) In closed or semi-closed positions, quick development may be less important than finding the best location for the pieces. (9...Nfd7!)

2.) Bishops need open diagonals! (12.e4! 16.d5! 41.f5!)

3.) The practical factor must not be underestimated. No matter if a position is objectively equal, if it obliges you to carry out tedious defence or is uncomfortable to defend, then it is better to look for alternatives. (19...Qf6? *19...Qe7!*)

4.) Even in the ending tactics are present, and may be crucial if you want to gain or increase an advantage. (25.Rd2! 67.Kxf6!! 69.f6? *69.c6!*)

5.) Lasker’s legacy was present throughout the game. Carlsen played to win from start to finish, without a break, pressing the enemy position.

As Lasker also demonstrated, even in bad positions the player who is worse must be alert, because there are always chances to defend and resist. (*71...*K*g6!*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 17

Magnus Carlsen – Evgeny Tomashevsky
London System [D02]
Wijk aan Zee (6), 22.01.2016

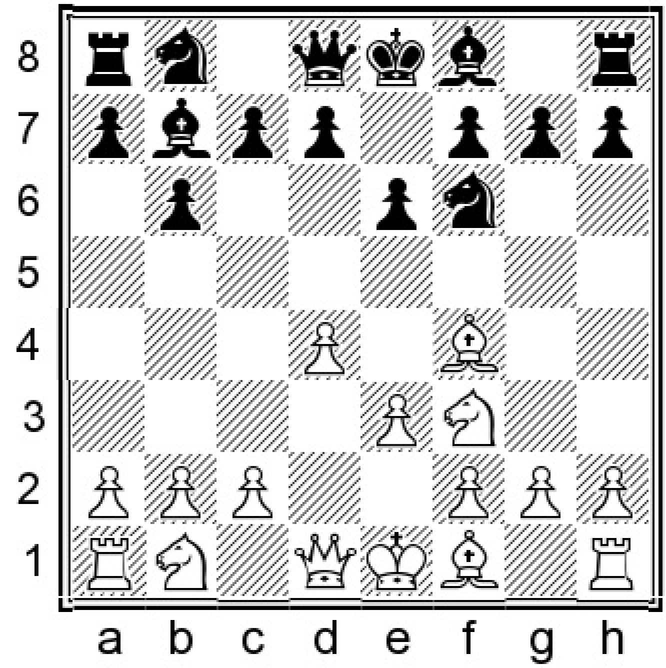
1.d4 Nf6 2.Nf3 e6 3.Bf4

After the game Carlsen commented he liked to play Bf4 especially against 2...e6, “since some systems are not then possible.”

3...b6

There are many ways to play for both sides here. The position is very flexible, and one of the main alternatives is 3...d5 4.e3 c5, without deciding the future of the c8-bishop.

4.e3 Bb7



5.h3

Question: Why play such an odd move instead of continuing with development?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The developing move 5.Nbd2 was of course possible, but h3 may be necessary at some point.

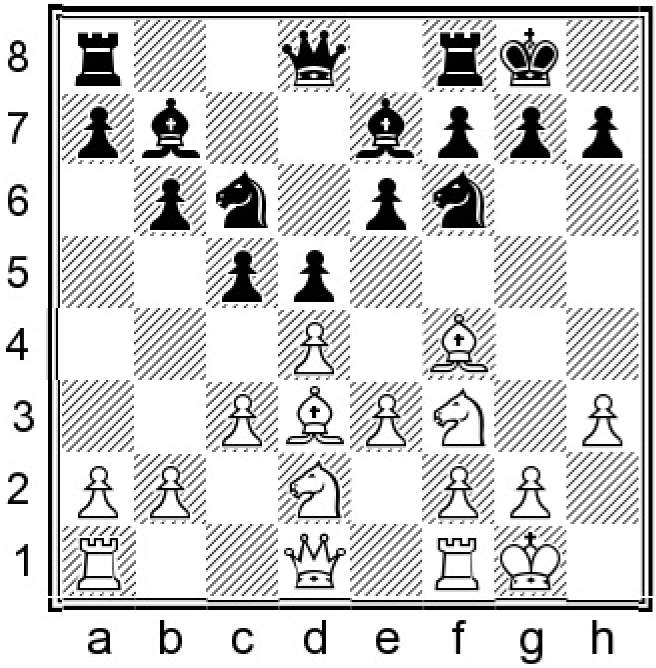
The main purpose of 5.h3 is to avoid...Nh5 exchanging the f4-bishop, as h2 is now available, while the move order could turn out to be irrelevant, as we will arrive at the same position anyway. After 5.Nbd2 Be7 White would play 6.h3, avoiding the same positional threat 6...Nh5.

Nielsen mentioned that Kramnik preferred to play 5.Nbd2. He thought maybe Kramnik wanted to avoid Alekhine's idea against Rubinstein in Dresden 1926 with the knight on d2, instead of the pawn on e3. Alekhine played 5...Bd6, and went on to win a nice game.

"So maybe only playing h3 once Black has committed with ...Be7 makes sense?"

The situation is different, as after 5.h3 Bd6 6.Bxd6 cxd6 the knight is still on b1, so White may consider playing c4 and then Nc3.

5...Be7 6.Bd3 0-0 7.0-0 c5 8.c3 Nc6 9.Nbd2 d5



10.Qe2

Question: Doesn't White's position seems pretty inoffensive?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The position is about equal, but I wouldn't say it is inoffensive. The game has not yet taken shape, and White has more space. Not much, but not nothing either.

10...Bd6

Question: Is this the best option? Why does he offer the exchange of his "good" bishop?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There is no clear advantage to be gained by either side after the opening of the center and/or playing active moves. Black could continue with useful waiting moves like 10...Rac8, but White has two useful moves, too: 11.Rad1 followed by 12.Rfe1, and Black would need to decide what to do next anyway. Black has less space, and after the exchange of bishops he wants to gain more mobility.

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

11.Rfe1!

Question: I understand 11.Bxd6 would, in a way, justify Black's idea, but why did Carlsen choose this move?

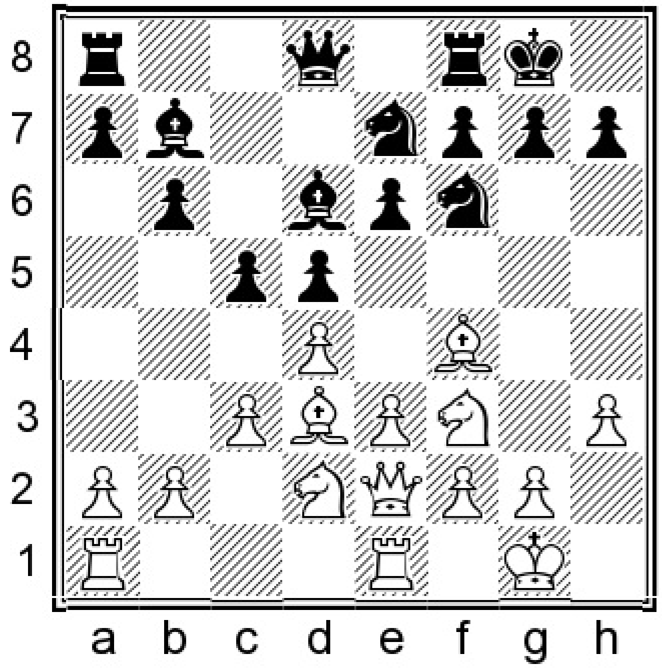
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen explained he had several options, including 11.Bg5 and 11.Ne5. He chose this move because he thought Black couldn't really play 11...Bxf4, as 12.exf4 cxd4 13.Nxd4! Nxd4 14.cxd4 Qd6 15.g3 "is quite passive for Black."

As Nielsen explained, White, by swapping knights with 13.Nxd4!, removed the option of ...Nb4-based counterplay.

After the line mentioned by Carlsen, he has doubled pawns, but attractive plans too, like transferring the knight to e5. Then the major pieces would move to the kingside, first the queen to the h-file, followed by Re3 and Rae1. In that line, the advance f5 should also be considered.

11...Ne7



The knight heads for g6 to try to force White to take on d6 so that Black can get some space. Carlsen thought it was “sort of a dubious” plan.

Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen now continue?

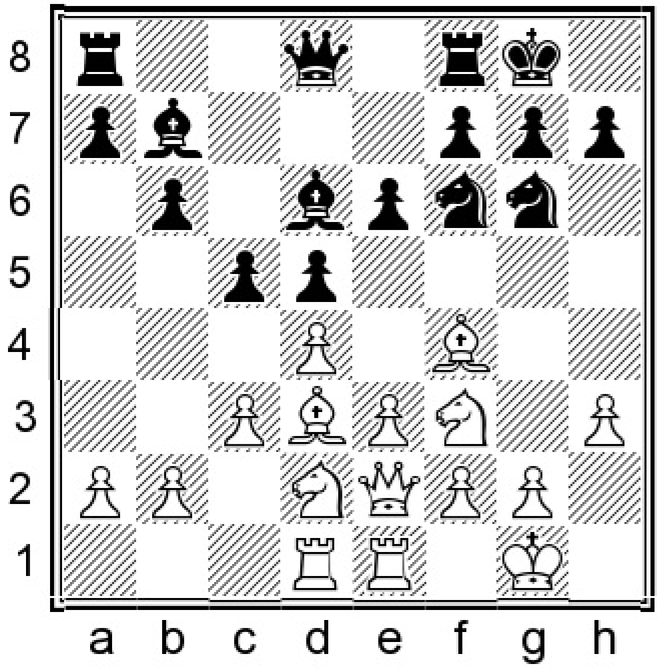
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.Rad1

A natural move, which centralizes the remaining inactive piece.

12...Ng6



Exercise: We know Carlsen regarded Black’s idea as dubious. How did he try to demonstrate it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13.Bxg6!

Question: I understand he didn’t want to exchange the dark-squared bishop, so as not to help Black’s development, but... why get rid of this bishop?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: “It’s not the pieces that leave the board that are important, but the ones that remain” (Tarrasch); this is the first step.

13...hxg6 14.Bxd6

The second step.

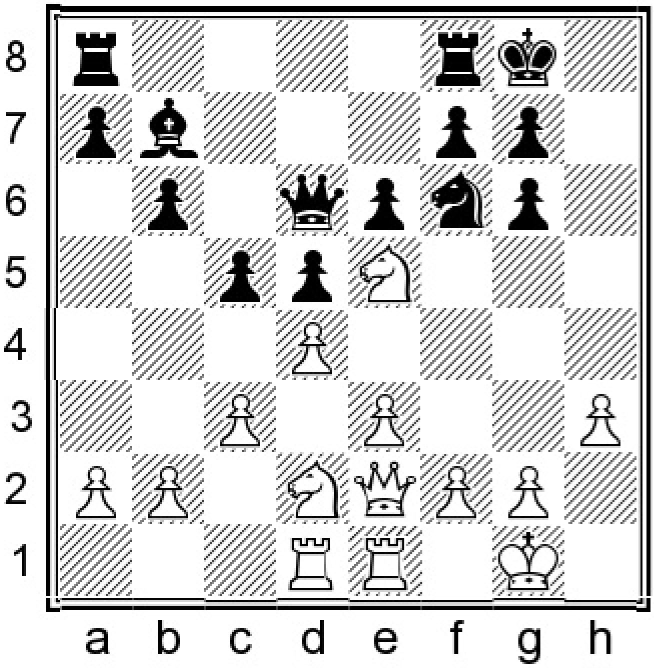
14...Qxd6 15.Ne5!

And this is the culmination of the idea. White has exchanged his “good” bishop, but one of his remaining pieces is the strong knight posted on e5, and after the weakness of g6 “it becomes much harder to dislodge the knight with ...f6” (Carlsen).

White’s plan is to play f4, put his queen on the h-file and send the other knight to g5 “and mating”

(Carlsen).

Of course Black cannot wait passively, as he would indeed get mated.



15...g5?!

Trying to prevent White from comfortably playing f4. Black was surely aware of the slight weaknesses created on his kingside, but it doesn't look that serious.

15...Ne4 was proposed. Carlsen indicted he wouldn't take on e4 yet, because his f2-pawn would be frozen. So he would probably play 16.f4 first, and after that he could take on e4 in better conditions. The strong knight on e5 would give White a better position again, and his plans would again include what we know: move his queen to the h-file and then somehow bring a rook to the attack, etc.

After 15...Nd7 White would of course also continue 16.f4.

15...Qe7 could also be considered, to follow with ...Qe8, which defends g6 and allows Black to play ...f6, though this is rather slow.

Exercise: Carlsen replied very quickly, what did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.f4!

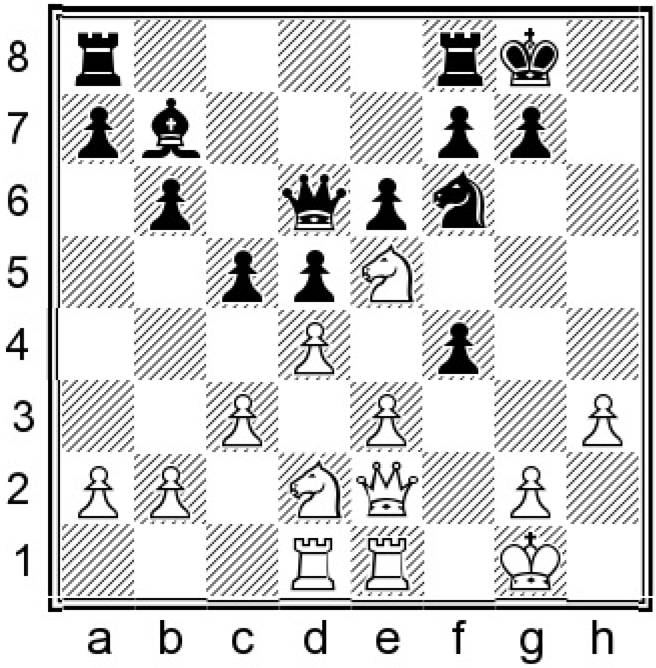
Question: Is that really so good? Why is it better than other moves?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This is not among the first moves considered by the currently strongest engines (April 2020). They prefer moves like 16.Ng4 or 16.Qf3, considering White to be slightly better.

However, Carlsen felt very excited and played this move quickly. He was already considerably ahead on the clock, but it is not as trivial a move as it might appear, and the main reason for it is seen in the next move.

16...gxf4



17.Rf1!

Question: Is it true that Carlsen played this variation very quickly? These moves look nice, it’s true, but they are also risky.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Firstly, White naturally didn’t consider 17.exf4?, which would give Black a good game after 17...cxd4 18.cxd4 Rac8.

Carlsen said after the game that it was an easy decision, because there isn’t that much to calculate as White has at least a draw in his hands, and “it feels it should be more.” In the critical line 17...fxe3 18.Rxf6 gxf6? there is a draw for sure and probably more, he said.

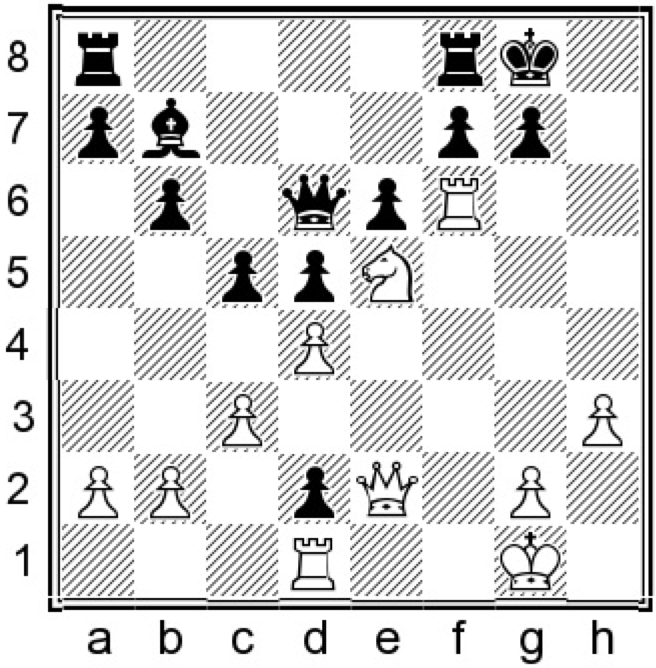
And there is: there would follow 19.Qg4+ Kh7 20.Rf1!, and Black’s king wouldn’t survive the mating attack.

So, there really is not much risk involved.

“This is the point. White wants the f-file open, to sacrifice the rook on f6, and deliver mate.” (Nielsen).

17...Nd7

The main line to consider was 17...fxe3 18.Rxf6 exd2!?



19.Rf4 was suggested, planning Qh5 and Rh4, where the only chance to resist seems to be 19...f6 (or 19...cxd4 20.cxd4 f6). However, 20.Ng6 is obviously annoying.

Nonetheless 19.Rxd2 seems even more precise (19.Qxd2! is also strong) then 19...gxf6? loses to 20.Qg4+ Kh7 21.Rf2! or 21.Rd3!, and a quick mate.

If 19...cxd4 then 20.Rxd4! is very strong, as the rook joins the attack.

After 19.Rxd2 the toughest defence seems to be 19...Qe7 (or 19...Qd8). There could follow 20.Rf4 Qg5 21.Rg4 Qh6 22.Qe1, with 23.Rd3-g3, and even 23.Qg3 ideas, delivering a winning attack.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

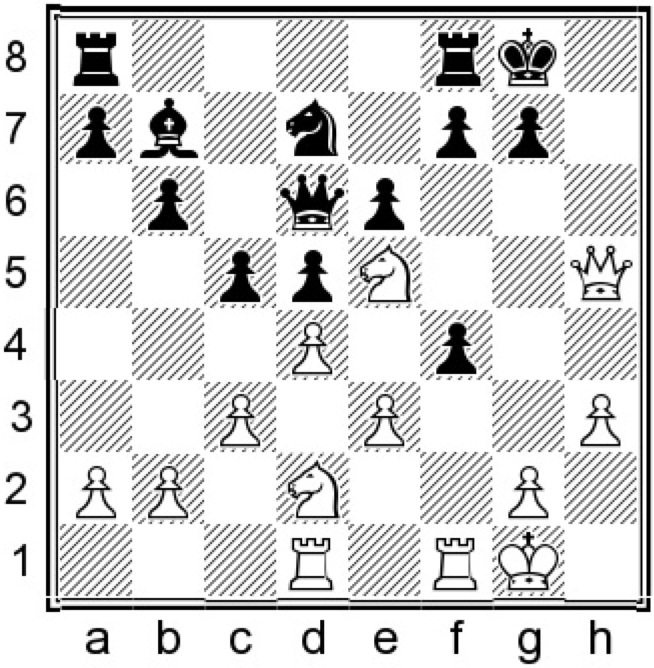
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.Qh5!

“I could have taken [on d7] and then played 19.Rxf4 and I am better, but perhaps not that much, so

I wanted to do something more interesting," said Carlsen, who was very much resolved to attack.



18...Nf6

If 18...g6 then 19.Nxg6 fxg6 20.Qxg6+ Kh8 is not winning, because "the stupid pawn on h3 just ruins everything!" said Carlsen.

There would follow 19.Qh6, and if 19...fxe3 then 20.Ndf3 planning 21.Ng5, winning.

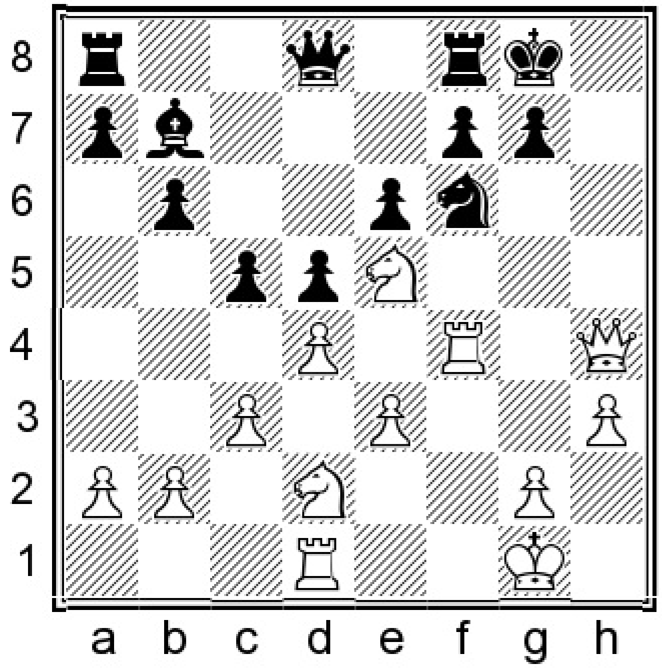
After 19...Nxe5 20.Rxf4! Black could try 20...g5. There are several good ways for White to continue. Carlsen quickly found one of them at the press conference: 21.dxe5 Qxe5 22.Rg4, which is convincing, e.g. 22...f6 23.Nf3! Qxe3+ 24.Kh2 Rf7 25.Re1, chasing Black's queen away from g5, and if 25...Qd3 then 26.Nxg5!

19.Qh4 Qd8?

Black tries to stop the attack by exchanging queens. This is generally a good idea, but not in this case as we shall see.

Carlsen mentioned 19...Nh7 as a better try, although he thought that after 20.exf4 Ba6 21.Rf2 cxd4 22.cxd4 White is clearly better.

20.Rxf4



20...Ne4?

Logical, but it loses without a fight. It was necessary to interpolate 20...cxd4 21.exd4, although after 21...Ne4 22.Qg4 (to play 23.Nxe4 and 24.Qh5) Black has no choice but to play the weakening 22...f5. The white knight is just too strong on e5, leaving White excellent winning chances in the middlegame or in any ending.

Exercise: How did White reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

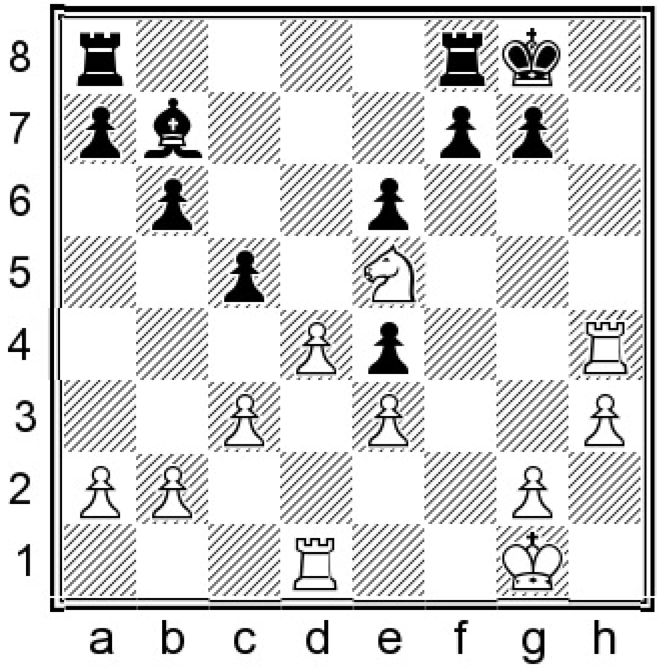
21.Nxe4!

This is now even stronger than the also good 21.Qg4.

21...Qxh4

Forced, as if 21...dxe4 then 22.Qh5 follows.

22.Rxh4 dxe4



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen punish Black's move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

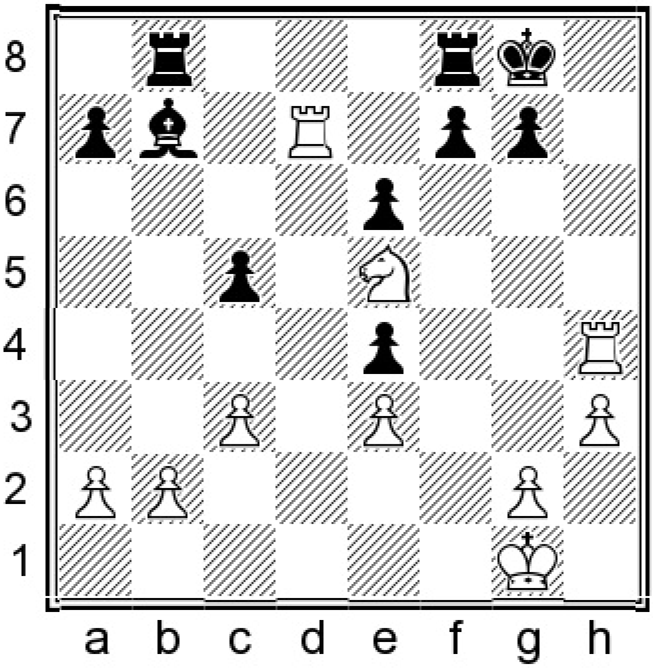
23.dxc5!

Preparing the rook infiltration.

23...bxc5 24.Rd7

"Complete domination," said Carlsen. The rook hits f7, the bishop and indirectly the a7-pawn. White is winning.

24...Rab8



Exercise: There are several good moves available here, and Carlsen chose the strongest. Which was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25.b3!

Neutralizing the b8-rook in advance and leaving all black pieces paralyzed.

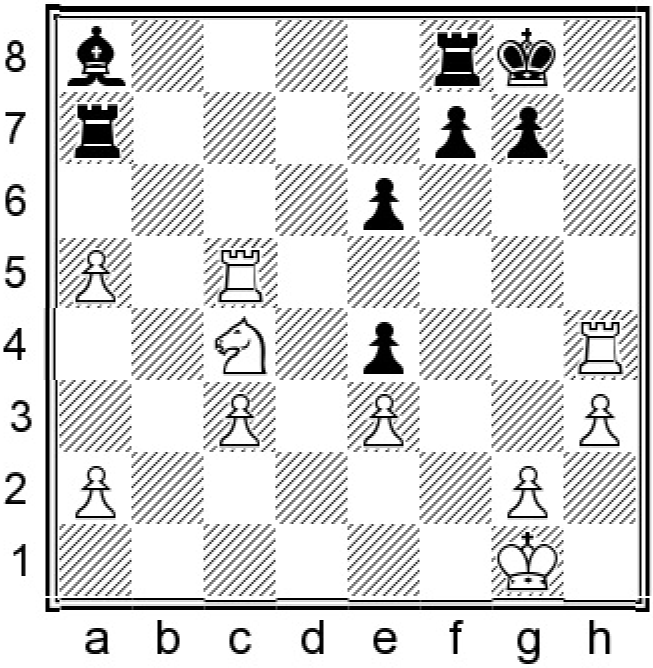
25...a5

Black is in zugzwang: 25...f6 allows 26.Ng6 and mate on h8. The bishop on b7 can't move, as then 26.Rxa7 follows, and the f-rook must defend f7.

26.Rc7

White gets his first material reward and keeps all the advantages of his position.

26...a4 27.bxa4 Ba8 28.a5 Rb7 29.Rxc5 Ra7 30.Nc4



Tomashevsky resigned. Some masters considered this a bit premature, but there is no doubt that White’s position is winning: there is no compensation for the two extra pawns.

1–0

Carlsen had a rather slow start in Wijk aan Zee, and only after this clear victory in the sixth round could he share first place. In this game the position looked very quiet, then Carlsen sharpened the game rather unexpectedly: he sacrificed material and soon got a strong attack. Black tried to save himself in the ending, but this was not enough. Magnus eventually gained first place in the tournament, with a one-point advantage over Fabiano Caruana. He was helped by Tomashevsky himself, who defeated Caruana in the last round.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” If you can find the right answers, you’ll probably discover the correct plan. Usually discovering the best moment to take these decisions is also relevant. Carlsen did it on various occasions. (11.Rfe1! 13.Bxg6! 14.Bxd6!)

2.) The same happens with the exchange of pawns. (*20...cxd4!?* 23.dxc5!)

3.) The weakening of the king is almost always one of the most important elements of the position. (15...g5? 16.f4! 17.Rf1!!)

4.) Exchanging queens is generally a good defensive decision, but not always. (20...Ne4?)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

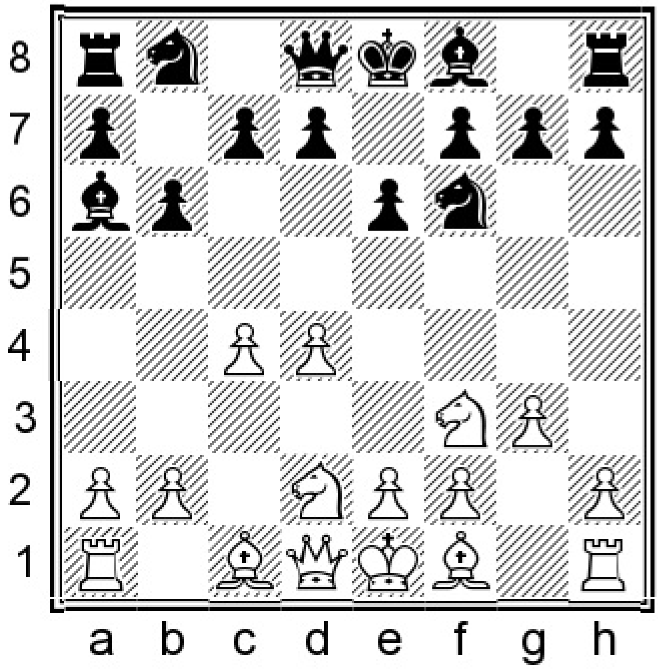
Game 18

Magnus Carlsen – Pentala Harikrishna

Queen’s Indian Defence [E15]

Norway Chess, Stavanger (1), 19.04.2016

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 b6 4.g3 Ba6 5.Nbd2



Question: Not the most usual move, right?

Show/Hide Solution

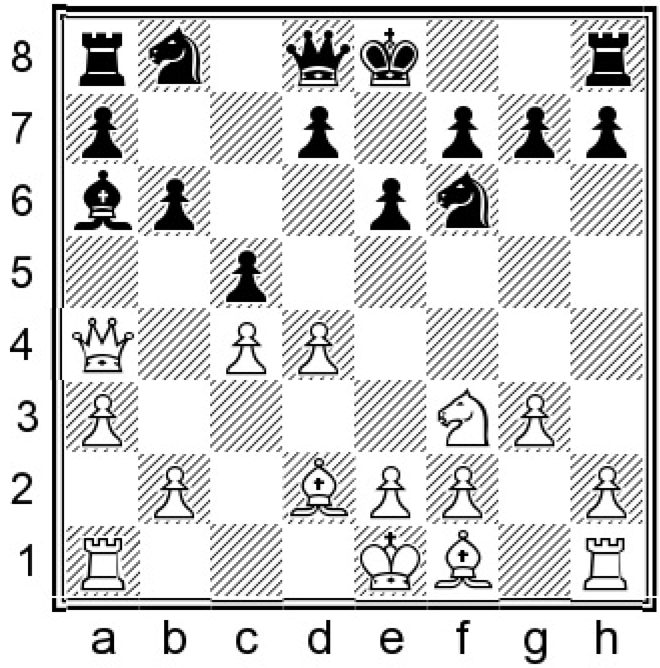
Answer: It’s a secondary line, yes, like 5.Qc2. The most popular move is 5.b3, and 5.Qa4 is also seen. Carlsen avoids the well-trodden paths, which he has done frequently in recent years.

In this case there was one more reason to choose it: this QID line was frequently played by Sergey Karjakin as Black. He was going to be Magnus’s challenger for the World Championship at the end of the year, having won the candidates tournament a few weeks earlier. So Carlsen probably didn’t want to show what he would play in the match.

5...Bb4

This is a “free” developing move, threatening 6...Bxc4. A different idea is 5...Bb7 6.Bg2 Be7 7.0-0 0-0 8.b3, and now the break 8...c5, played in Carlsen – Karjakin, Shamkir 2014, among other games.

6.Qa4 c5 7.a3 Bxd2+ 8.Bxd2



8...0-0

Harikrishna blamed a great part of his defeat on his reluctance to follow the main line.

He mentioned 8...Bb7, although the most common move order in the line he mentioned is 8...cxd4 9.Bg2 Bb7 10.0-0 Bc6 11.Qd1 Bxf3 12.Bxf3 Nc6 13.Bf4. Nonetheless, there is nothing wrong with his move.

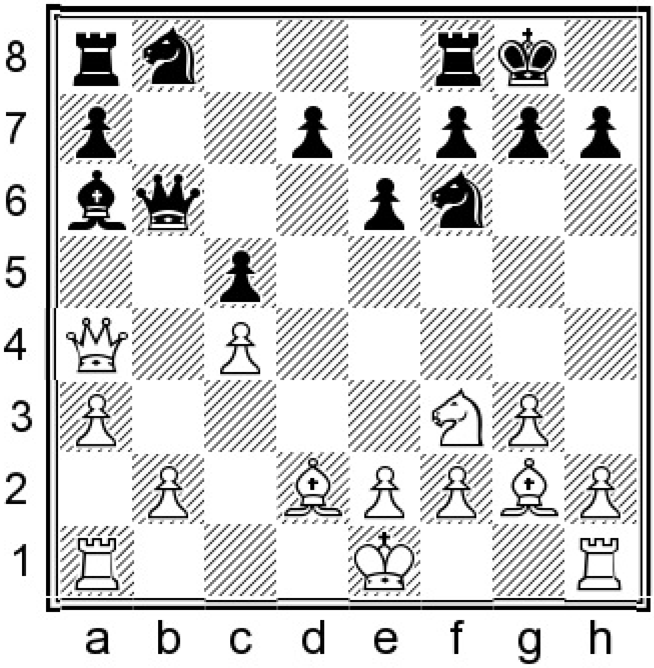
9.dxc5

Question: Is it really necessary to eliminate the tension?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: No, it isn’t, but it’s not bad either. This decision could be postponed by playing 9.Bg2 first, but it leads to an unexpected practical advantage for Carlsen.

9...bxc5 10.Bg2 Qb6?!



Question: Why is this dubious? It seems logical to take advantage of the early dxc5 to use this normally unavailable square to press b2, so what's wrong with it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It doesn't look bad, true, but this natural move is an inaccuracy and turns out to be the cause of the quick worsening of Black's position.

We shall see pretty soon that 10...Bb7! was preferable, because the bishop, seemingly active on a6, will be exposed, while the queen isn't really well situated on b6.

Exercise: How did Carlsen respond to the attack on b2?

Show/Hide Solution

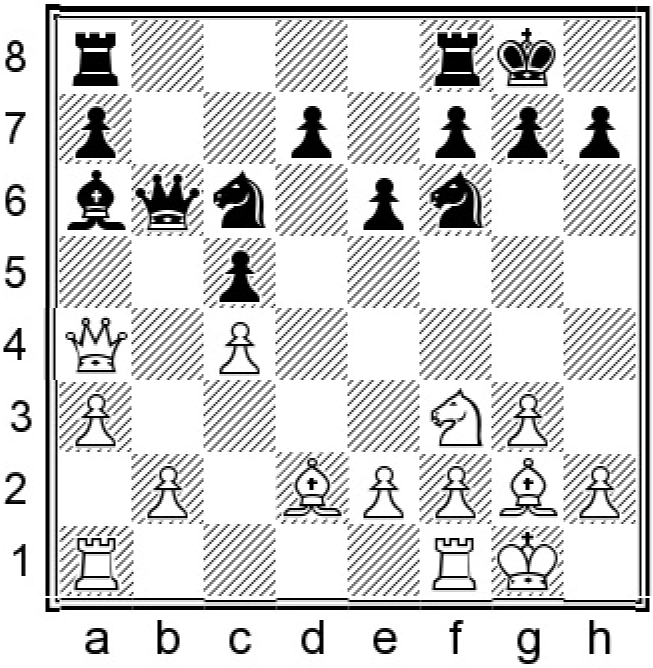
Answer:

11.0-0

A useful developing move. The pawn is not really attacked, and if 11...Qxb2?? then 12.Rfb1.

11...Nc6

If 11...d5, trying to justify the situation of the a6-bishop, 12.Ne5 would be a strong response. If 12...Qxb2 then 13.Bf4 follows and after the activation of the rooks Black would have severe development issues.



Exercise: There are several attractive options, what do you think Carlsen played now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.Be3

Highlighting the drawback of the queen being situated on b6. Black must consider b4 on each move.

12...Rfc8?!

The rook avoids a possible Bxc5 with a double attack, but maybe it worsens the position a little. Black instead had the ingenious resource 12...Rab8, as after 13.b4 Bxc4 14.Bxc5 there was the intermediate move 14...Bb3!, and Black gets a better position than in the game after 15.Bxb6 Bxa4 16.Bc5 Rfc8. Nonetheless, White could renew the threat b4, e.g. by playing 13.Rab1.

Exercise: How did Carlsen proceed now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13.Rfd1!

13.b4 was not so strong yet due to 13...Bxc4 14.Bxc5 Qb8, hitting e2 and with ...a5 on the way.

This seems the right moment to send a rook into battle, and it prepares b4 with a stronger effect.

The main alternatives were 13.Rac1 and 13.Rad1, but Carlsen preferred to keep his a1-rook in its initial position. As we shall see, this is useful in some lines.

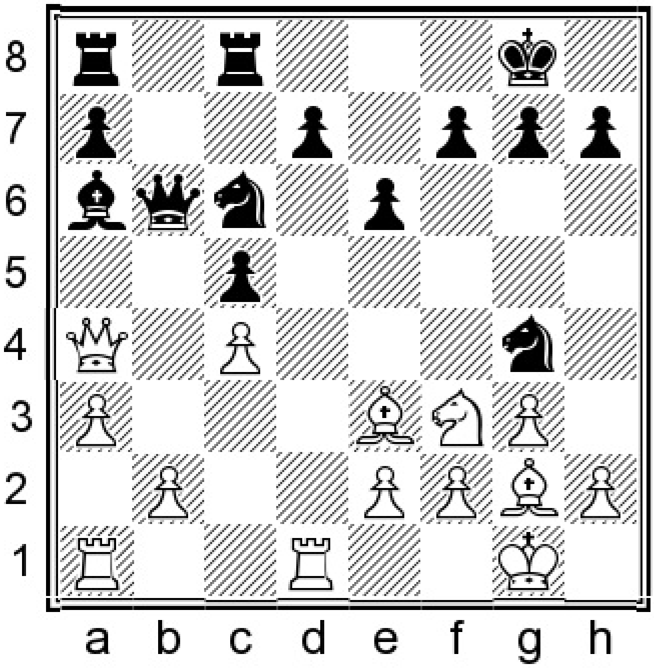
After the game, Harikrishna mentioned 13.Nd2, defending c4 and planning to play b4, but Black has 13...Bb7 14.b4 Nd4!? at his disposal, with better defensive chances.

13...d5

"It is difficult to suggest something for Black," said Peter Svidler in the official commentary, after ruling out 13...Qa5, where he showed 14.Qxa5 Nxa5 15.Ne5, and White is better.

14.Qc2! is even better, and the pending threat b4 is inevitable. After 14...Bb7 15.b4 cxb4 16.axb4 Qc7 17.b5 Ne7 18.Bf4 White has a considerable advantage.

Question: But why not repel the annoying bishop with 13...Ng4 instead?



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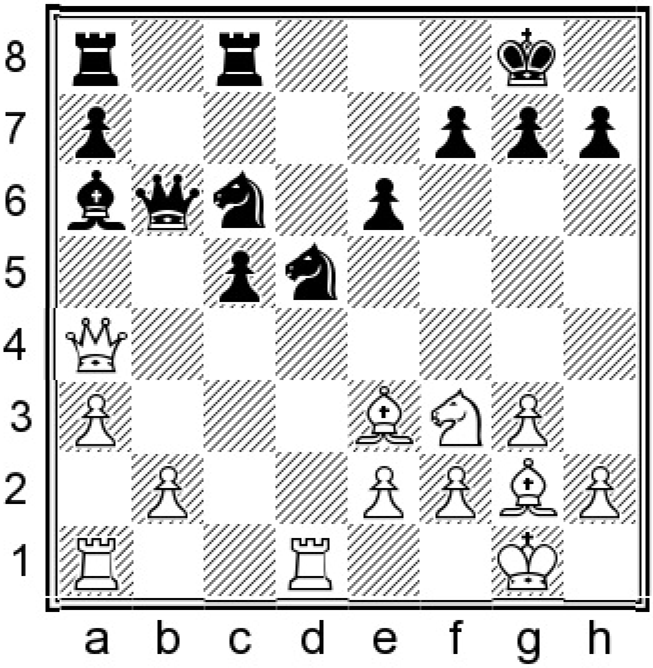
Answer: The bishop could simply withdraw, leaving the g4-knight without a purpose on g4, but 14.Rxd7! Nxe3 15.fxe3 Qxb2?! 16.Rf1! is even stronger.

14.cxd5 exd5

Exercise: If 14...Nxd5 then the same response would follow, which is it?



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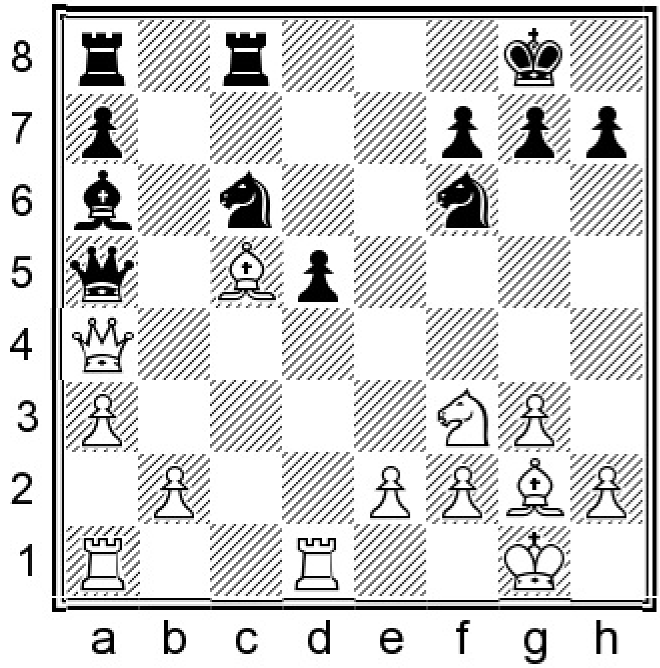
Answer:

15.Bxc5!

15.b4?! would be answered by 15...Bxe2, but the text move gives a clear advantage after the coming complications.

15...Qa5

15...Qxc5 16.Qxa6 is of course out of the question, but this imaginative reply obliges White to play accurately.



Exercise: Carlsen indeed played the most accurate move next, what was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

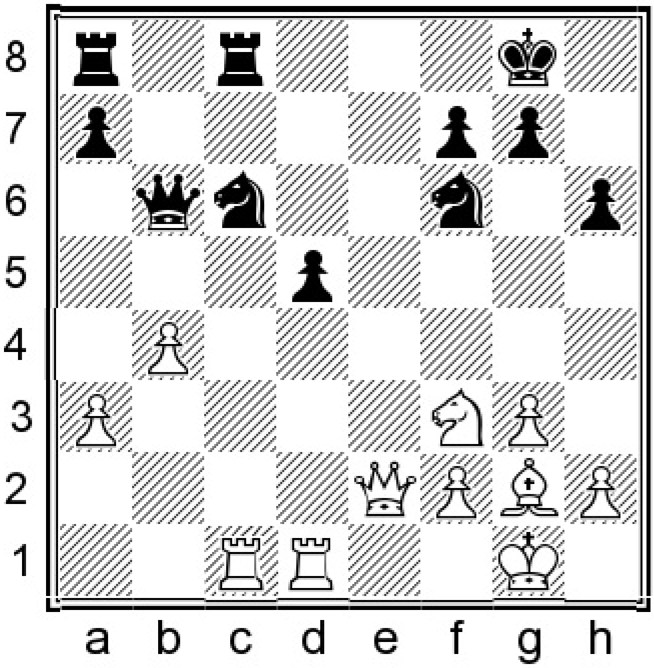
16.Qc2!

White chose the best option, returning the pawn to get a clear positional advantage. White could have tried 16.Qxa5 Nxa5, aiming to conserve his extra pawn, but 17.b4 Nb3 18.Ra2 Nxc5 19.bxc5 Rxc5 followed by e.g. ...Rac8 doesn’t impress, while after 17.Nd4 Rxc5 18.b4 Rc4 19.bxa5 Ra4 White’s advantage is not significant.

16...Bxe2 17.Qxe2 Qxc5 18.Rac1 Qb6 19.b4

Now White’s advantage is overwhelming, as all his pieces are in good positions with a strong g2-bishop while Black has a serious weakness on d5 without compensation.

19...h6



Exercise: Carlsen now played a far from obvious choice, what was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.Qe3!

This move resembles two classical examples from Botvinnik's heritage, 20.Qe3! against Sorokin in the 1931 USSR Championship, and 10.Be3! against Boleslavsky in the 1941 USSR Championship.

20...Qb7

A sad concession. White now dominates the black squares too, and the whole board.

Harikrishna didn't believe 20...Qxe3 21.fxe3 would give him more practical chances; 22.Bh3 would be threatened.

Exercise: How did White reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.Bh3

In a simple way, gaining more space, the bishop is more useful here than on g2 with its pressure on d5.

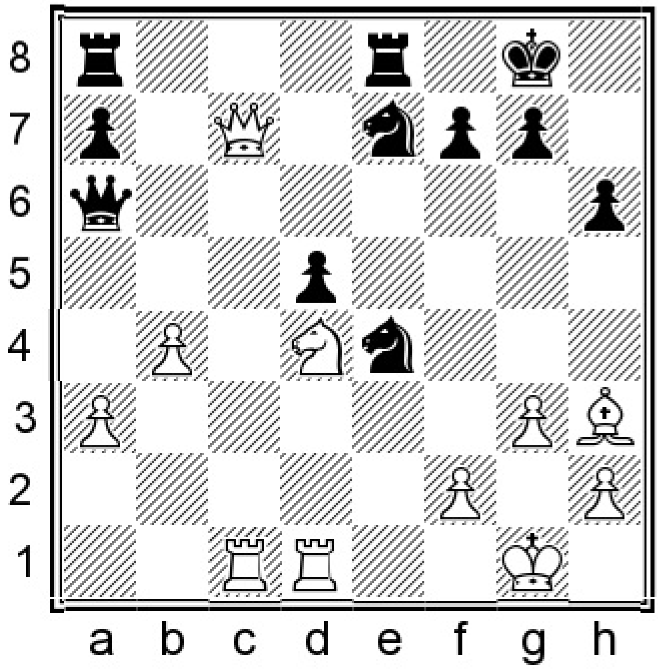
21...Re8

The rook must abandon the c-file, as if 21...Rc7 then 22.Qc5! is very strong.

22.Qc3 Ne7 23.Nd4

After also ejecting the knight White continues winning space.

23...Ne4 24.Qc7 Qa6



Harikrishna logically avoids the exchange of queens, as that would leave Black with a very passive position and White with a decisive pawn majority on the queenside.

Exercise: Carlsen begins a series of moves winning even more terrain. What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25.f3!

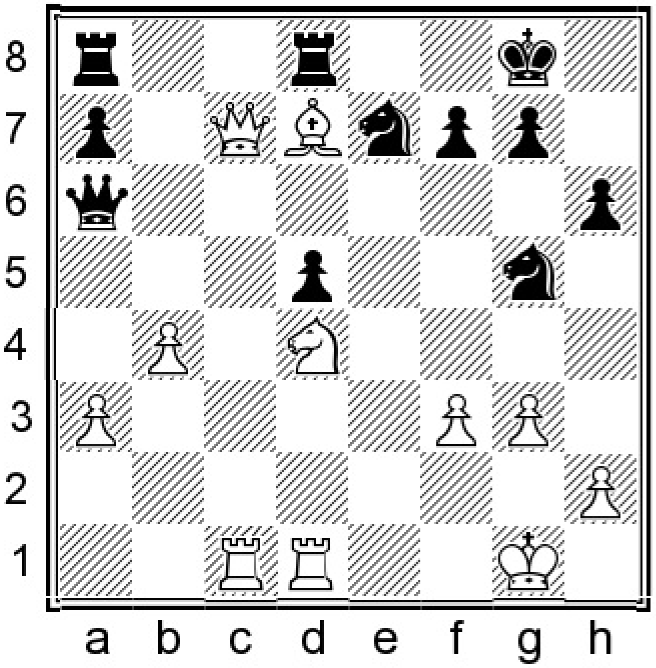
In the first place he expels the only active black piece.

It was difficult to know which the best move order was. There are some differences between what was chosen and first playing 25.Bd7 and then 26.f3, but both are of similar strength. Let's analyse a little: 25.Bd7 Red8 26.f3 Nd6 (26...Nf6 is met by 27.Bb5 and Black is forced to accept a much worse ending) 27.Re1! preventing the queen from reaching e2, then 27...Ng6 28.a4 and Black is too passive.

25...Ng5

Looking for complications. If 25...Nf6 then White continues to improve his position with 26.Rc3.

26.Bd7 Red8



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.h4!

Once again, Carlsen drives one active piece away. It is clear this move weakens the kingside, so it was necessary to check the variations carefully before taking this decision.

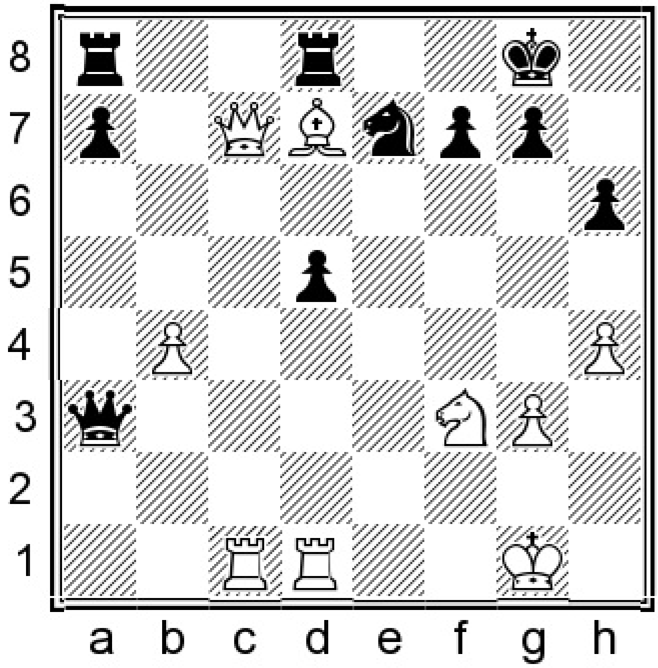
If White chooses different moves then 27...Qf6 could follow, trying to give support to the g5-knight.

27...Nxf3+

Black places his practical hopes on this sacrifice. It's true that he gets three pawns for the piece, but they have no impact on the resulting position.

27...Ne6? 28.Bxe6 was not possible, and Harikrishna rejected the passive 27...Nh7 due to the simple 28.a4, and Black is defenceless.

28.Nxf3 Qxa3



Exercise (simple): What did White play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.Kg2

Sure, defending both f3 and g3, but not 29.Rc3?? due to 29...Rxd7!

29...Qb2+

29...Qxb4 immediately was somewhat better, but there is no big difference.

30.Rd2 Qxb4

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

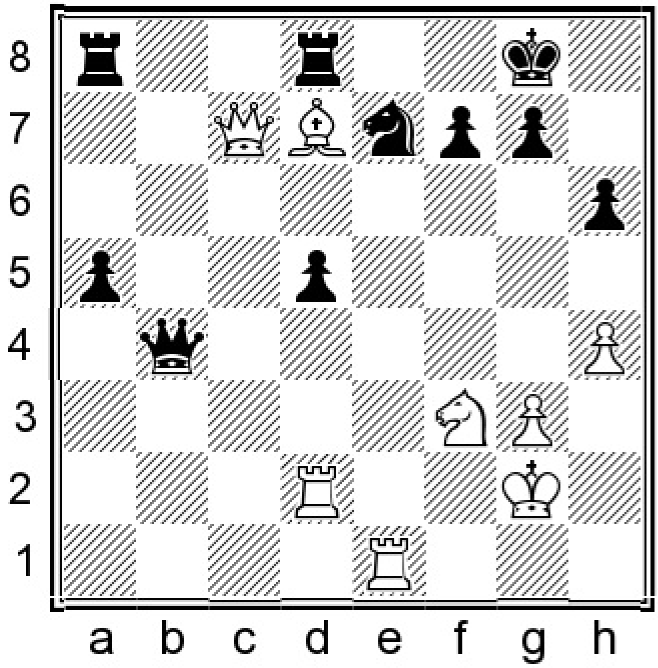
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.Re1!

Initiating the final offensive, without fearing the advance of Black's free a-pawn.

31...a5



Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32.Rde2

This is the complement of the previous move. Throughout almost the entire game Black is forced to retreat to passive positions.

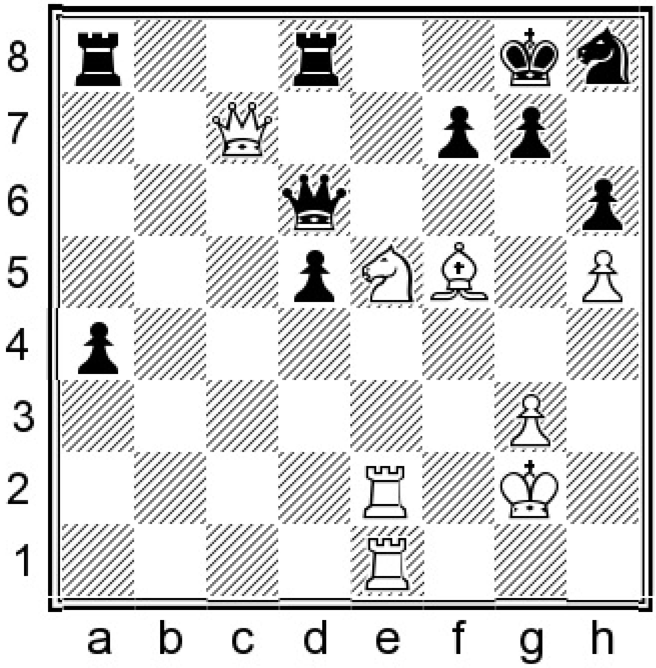
32...Ng6 33.h5 Nh8

A sad destiny for the knight, but 33...Nf8? is answered by 34.Be8! f6 35.Qf7+ and 36.Re7, winning.

34.Bf5

The decisive attack is on the way, and it is easy to continue it thanks to the great superiority of forces that White has on the kingside.

34...a4 35.Ne5 Qd6



Exercise: What should he play now?

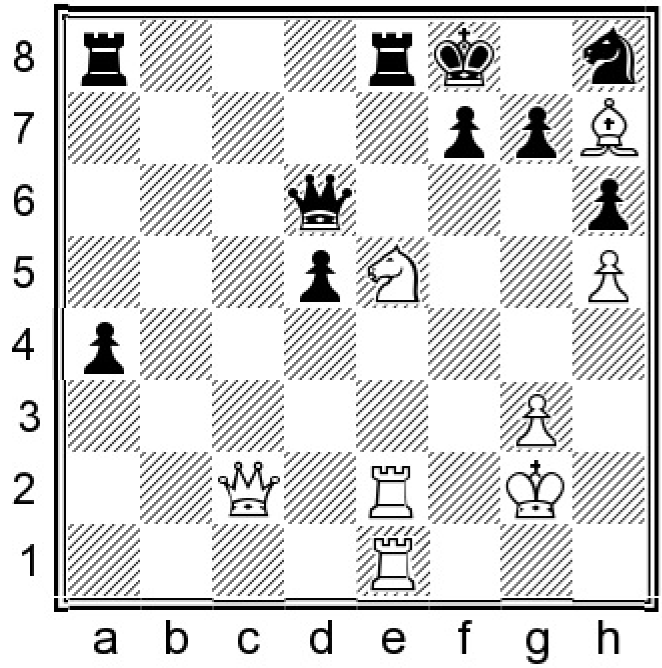
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

36.Qc2!

Continuing with the attack, White threatens to win by 37.Nc6 among other moves. It won't be possible to defend both e8 and the rook.

36...Re8 37.Bh7+ Kf8



Exercise: There are several winning moves, which one will you choose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38.Qf5

This is a winning move, threatening for example 39.Nd7+ and 39.Ng6+, although 38.Nd7+ Qxd7 39.Qc5+ was quicker.

38...Re7 39.Bg6 Kg8 40.Nxf7 Rxf7 41.Bxf7+

And seeing 42.Re8+ coming Black resigned.

Some people watching the game live, very amused, pointed out the mate in three moves ignored by the world champion: 41.Re8+ Rxe8 42.Rxe8+ Rf8 43.Bh7#

Question: Why did Carlsen miss two quick mates?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There is an explanation: there was no time increment in that tournament, so the last part of the game was played in serious time trouble, even without the players writing the moves down. So it is understandable that Carlsen, after seeing a clear win, simply played it, without looking for shorter ways.

1–0

Carlsen decided to deviate from the most common lines very early in the game. His opponent played reasonable moves but not the best ones, as Carlsen was able to demonstrate.

White got a better position quite soon, thanks to tactics. Carlsen increased the pressure and even though his opponent defended his position resourcefully, the World Champion won, again, by a mating attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) “Mistrust natural-looking moves.” (Reti). (10...Qb6?)

2.) Sometimes it isn’t easy to distinguish whether a piece is in an active position or if it is too vulnerable and turns out to be a drain. (10...Qb6? *10...*B*b7!*)

3.) The best destination of the rooks is sometimes a difficult choice, which may turn out to be very relevant in the course of the game. (12...Rfc8? *12...*R*ab8!* 13.Rfd1!)

4) Sometimes it is better to reject a material advantage, giving preference to positional advantages. (16.Qc2!)

5) Preventing the opponent’s activity can be as important as activating one’s own forces. (21.Bh3! 25.f3! 27.h4!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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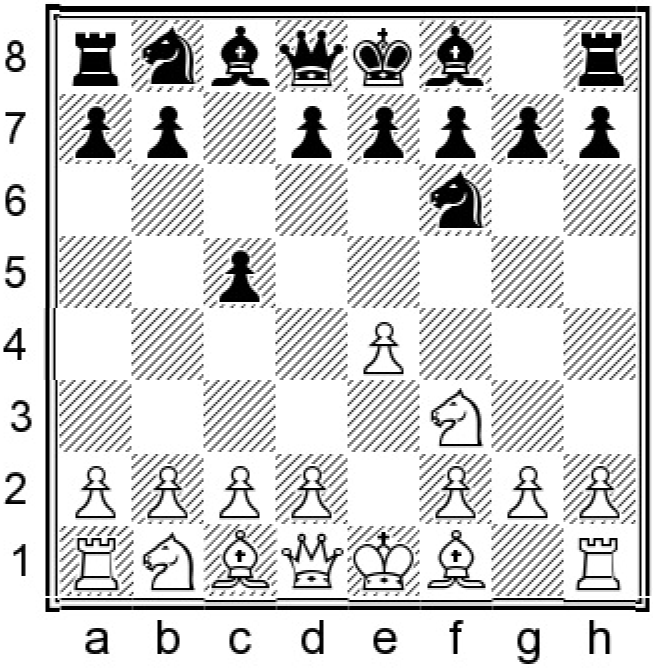
Game 19
Magnus Carlsen – Nils Grandelius
Sicilian Defence [B29]
Norway Chess, Stavanger (3), 21.04.2016

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nf6



Question: What a surprise, and it’s only move 2! Isn’t this move seldom seen at the top level?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This line was not totally strange to the Sweden number 1’s practice, but for some reason Carlsen, who knew this, said that he hadn’t seriously considered it.

The World Champion stated that he had mixed feelings when he saw it at the board. He didn’t stop blaming himself for not having prepared against it, but on the other hand he told himself “Things cannot go wrong if White simply makes normal moves!” This evaluation was strongly supported by his opponent. After he was asked when had he had committed the decisive mistake, he jokingly answered “On move two!”

3.e5

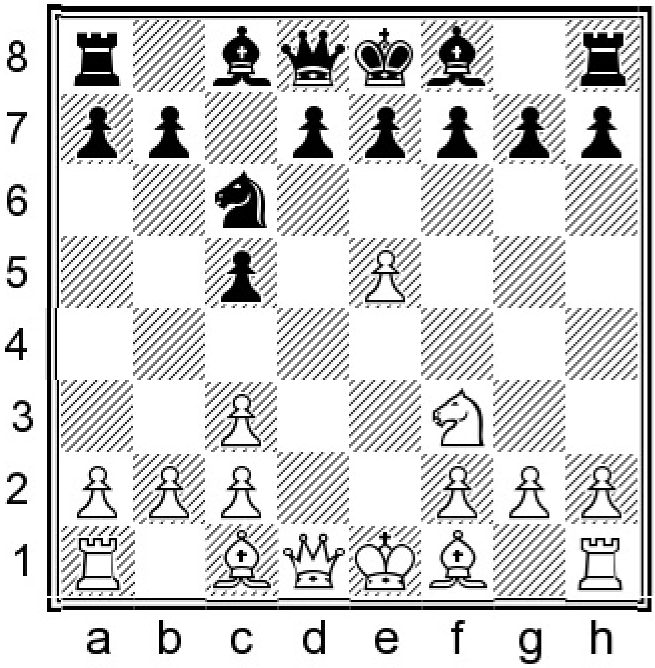
More incisive than the alternative 3.Nc3.

3...Nd5 4.Nc3 Nxc3

Previously, the pawn sacrifice arising after 4...e6 5.Nxd5 exd5 6.d4 Nc6 7.dxc5 Bxc5 8.Qxd5 was popular, but it was eventually established that the complications deriving from 8...Qb6 9.Bc4 Bxf2+ 10.Ke2 were good for white.

6...d6 is also played, accepting the creation of an isolated d-pawn after White takes on d6 and c5. This move was occasionally played by Korchnoi and other masters, but it was never too popular.

5.dxc3 Nc6



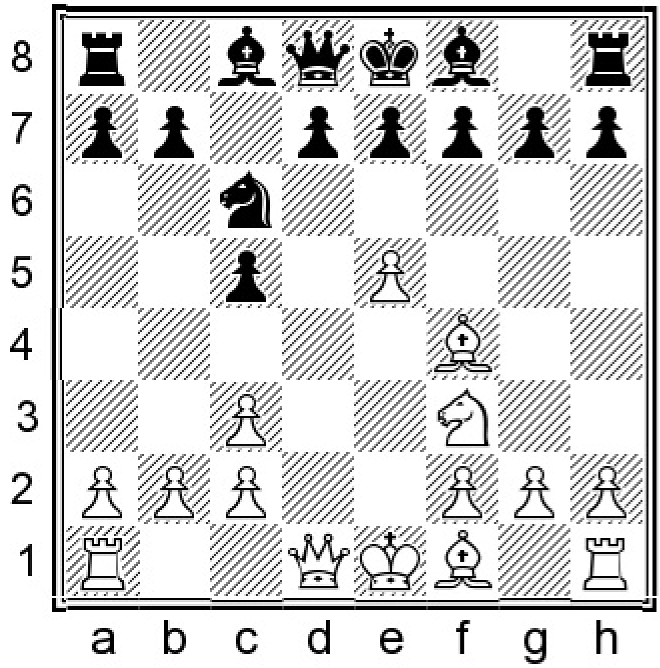
Exercise: The structure has changed. Now White has to choose a plan. What do you think Carlsen played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

6.Bf4

White plans to castle queenside and use the d-file. The next moves will be 7.Qd2 and 0-0-0, or depending on the situation, 7.Bd3 or 7.Bc4 followed by Qe2 and 0-0-0. The bishop is well situated on f4, over-protecting e5 and very active along the h2-b8 diagonal if Black plays ...d5 or ...d6 and White answers exd6.



6...Qb6

Black didn't play the usual 6...e6 as he wants to try to divert White from his plan. Now the b2-pawn is attacked, and any reaction seems to imply a concession from White.

Exercise: Carlsen pondered this position for 9 minutes, what did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

7.Qc1!

Without giving up the idea of castling long, which would obviously happen in case of 7.Rb1, and without weakening the queenside, which would happen after 7.b3. Naturally, not all is great for White: the queen is not well situated on c1, and castling queenside will need one more tempo, but he also has the possibility of playing Bd3 followed by short castling.

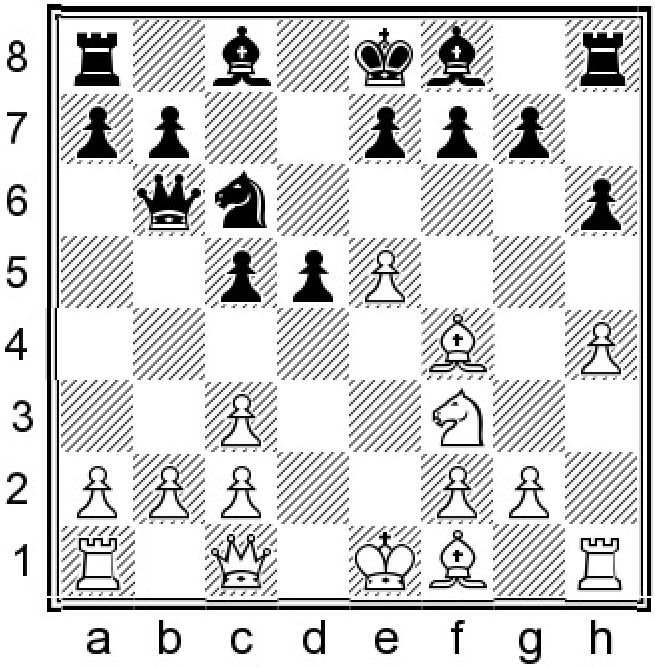
White has several useful waiting moves available, and 8.Nd2 heading for c4 is also possible.

What about Black? We cannot say the same: his development is worse and the likelihood that his king will be stuck in the center is worrisome.

7...f6!

This move was a surprise for several masters, though not for Carlsen, who thought that Black didn't have many options. The idea is to get rid of the e5-pawn and occupy the center. After e.g. 8...d6, then if 9.exd6 Black has a good position after playing 9...e5!.

In a previous game Black chose 7...h6 8.h4 d5.



Exercise: What would Carlsen play in that case?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: White would justify his previous queen move by playing 9.exd6 exd6 10.Qe3+!. If 10...Be6 then 11.Bc4 Qxb2? 12.0-0 is crushing, while if 10...Be7 then simply 11.0-0-0.

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply to 7...f6?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

8.Bc4

In some positions there are still big differences between what the best players considered and the preferences of the best engines (as of April 2020).

8.a4 is the preference of the engines. What Carlsen played (not among the engines' first options) was more "human": he didn't focus on the queenside, but decided to accelerate his development and make Black's king the main target. The bishop on c4 makes life more difficult for the black king, and castling short is now more dangerous.

Nonetheless, we should be aware that White's developed pieces can be harassed by the black pawns, complicating the position.

8...g5

Black effectively decides to attack White’s pieces, because he doesn’t fancy quiet development.

If 8...d6 then Nielsen suggested 9.exf6 gxf6 10.Qe3, considering that the black center will be worth less than White’s better development.

A different idea is 9.exd6 e5 10.Be3 Bxd6 11.Qd2, planning Qd5 and 0-0-0, or 11.Nd2. In both cases the black center has too many weaknesses and the presence of the c4-bishop along the a2-g8 diagonal is justified.

9.Bg3

The first important decision. White maintains the tension, postponing more radical measures.

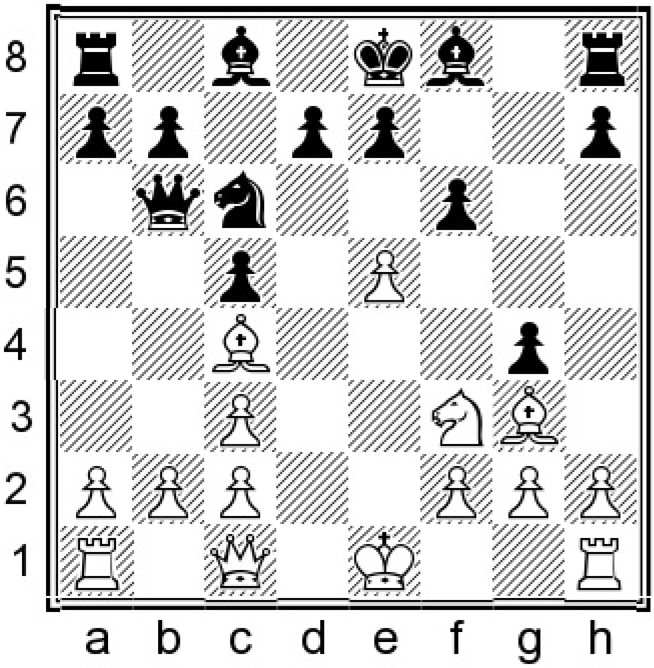
Question: What else could White have played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The position is getting wild. Black plans to play ...g4 and take the e5-pawn if the knight retreats. The black king remains in the center facing open lines, so Black’s expansion is not free.

The alternative was to sacrifice the bishop by playing 9.exf6. After 9...gxf4 10.Qxf4 White’s position is attractive, but as Nielsen pointed out going into concrete analysis, Black has a good answer with 10...Na5!, and it is not clear how to continue the attack.

9...g4



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10.exf6!

With a very promising sacrifice. It is almost impossible to calculate so many complications, but Black’s king in the center allows him to be quite optimistic.

This decision was already taken when White chose 9.Bg3, because if the f3-knight moves away, then 10...Nxe5 follows, as already mentioned, and Black is fine.

10...gxf3

Question: What is the substantial difference between this piece sacrifice and the preceding one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The most relevant difference is the strength of the sacrificed piece. The g3-bishop will be much more important than the f3-knight, which was the remaining piece in the earlier line. The bishop hits c7 and may move to h4, as we shall see.

To reach this conclusion, a precise calculation is necessary to evaluate both situations. Maybe the advantage Carlsen has over other top masters is that he is generally faster in arriving at the right conclusions.

11.Qf4

This was played quickly by Carlsen. The queen moves to the kingside with strong effect, but of course this is not enough reason to prefer the move. Now we enter tactical complications, and these were calculated earlier by Carlsen.

The natural move 11.0-0 was the main alternative, to add the f1-rook to the attack, as the queen could move to f4 later.

The most accurate defence would again be 11...Na5!. After the strongest continuation according to the engines, 12.f7+ Kd8 13.Bd5, followed by 14.Re1 or by activating the queen with Qf4 or Qe3, depending on Black’s response, White has adequate compensation for the piece.

11...fxg2!

Good defence. Castling short is no longer possible for White, so the h1-rook will take time to enter the game, and Black gains a free tempo for development.

If 11...Na5 Carlsen showed after the game that White gets good compensation for the piece playing

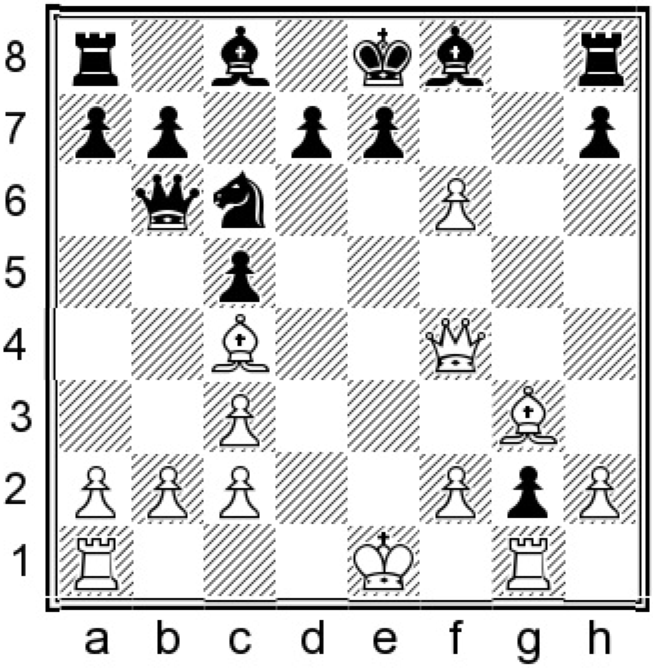
12.f7+! Kd8 13.Bd5, in a way similar to one that we shall see again.

On the other hand, 12.fxe7? Bxe7 13.Bf7+ instead is not enough, not because of 13...Kd8?, as after 14.0-0 the black queen is tied to the defence of c7, when the white rooks will quickly centralize and decide the game.

The correct continuation is the amazing 13...Kf8!, with the idea of 14...Qf6, and the discovered check with 14.Be6+ (avoiding ...Qf6) 14...Ke8 only draws.

12.Rg1

“The critical position of the game” (Grandelius).



12...Na5?

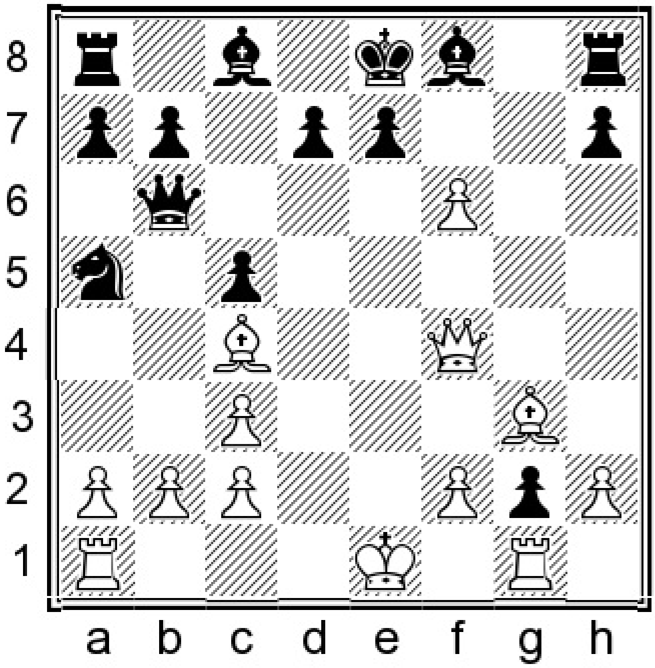
A “universal” answer. It is logical, but we know that general considerations are not enough at this moment. Precise calculation is essential, and as a result Black’s move is a serious mistake.

The best defence was 12...h5!, intending ...Bh6 and also to annoy the g3-bishop with ...h4. Besides, it of course stops 13.0-0-0 due to 13...Bh6.

White has various possibilities after this. 13.f7+?! is not the best, as after 13...Kd8 14.0-0-0 the move 12...h5 would be fully justified with Black playing 14...h4! 15.Bxh4 Qc7!, and Black repels the attack. The white queen cannot avoid exchange, defend the h4-bishop and defend the h2-pawn at the same time. White can, however, continue 13.fxe7 Bxe7 14.0-0-0 or 14.Qf7+, with reasonable compensation for the piece.

It is also possible to maintain the position with 13.Rxg2. Then 13...Kd8! seems best, with the ideas of 14...Bh6 or 14...e5 (the immediate 13...e5? fails to 14.f7+ and the queen gives check from f6 or g5, with a winning attack). After 13...Kd8 14.fxe7+ Bxe7 15.0-0-0 h4 16.Bxh4 Bxh4 17.Rg8+ Rxg8

18.Qxh4+ Kc7 19.Bxg8 we arrive at a complex position. White has two pawns as compensation for the piece and we must add the inactive black pieces and the f- and h- passed pawns. Chances are about equal.



Exercise: How did Carlsen punish Black’s choice?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13.f7+!

Of course not now 13.Bd5?? because of 13...Qxf6.

13.fxe7 Bxe7 14.Bf7+ isn’t a good idea either, as then 14...Kd8 is possible while 14...Kf8! again forces White to give perpetual check.

13...Kd8

Exercise (simple): How should he continue now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.Bd5

Sure, now it is good.

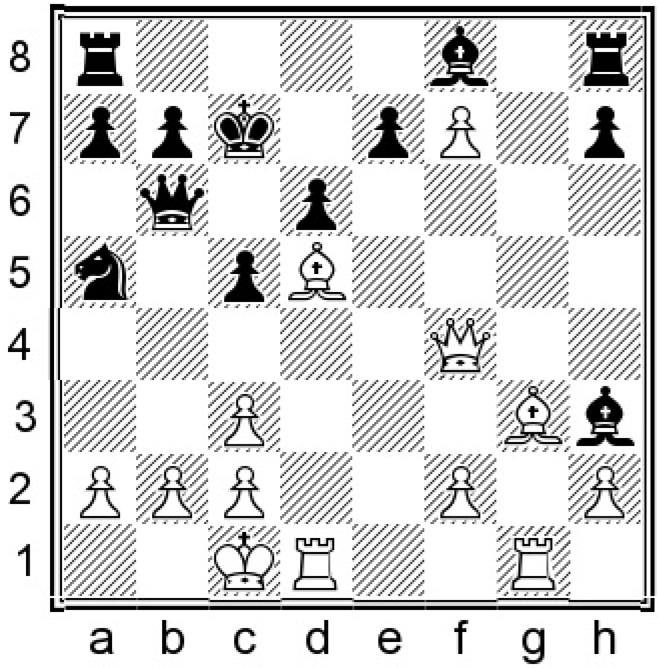
14...Bh6?!

Played after thinking for 20 minutes.

As Nielsen commented, at first it looks like Black has rejected the attack. After ...d6 his king will be quite safe, and his planned structure e7-d6-c5 looks solid, allowing him to continue with development.

The computer initially agrees, but after a few minutes it comes to the realisation that the problems are very serious.

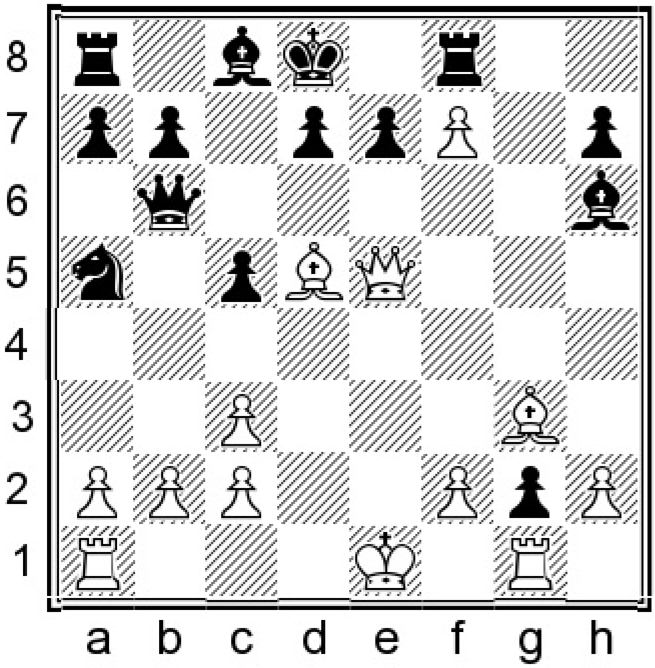
Carlsen was expecting the continuation 14...d6 15.0-0-0 Kc7 16.Rxg2 Bh3 17.Rgg1, where Black's position can show some progress, but it isn't enough.



Black is rather impotent because the f7-pawn is very strong. One of White's ideas is to play 18.Bh4 followed by Rg8, and this could even follow after 17...h5. Black could try 17...Nc6, hoping to play 18...Ne5 and ...Ng6. This wouldn't solve all his difficulties, but it would allow more resistance. In this case 18.Qe4 planning 19.Bf4 and controlling e5 is possible, followed by Rg8.

Nielsen pointed out that the quiet move 18.Kb1 is also possible, then 18...Ne5 is strongly met by 19.Qh4, followed by 20.Bxe5 and Rg8. So Black tried a different way to continue, more radical, but also insufficient, as it has a tactical flaw.

15.Qe5 Rf8



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Bh4

Threatening mate. Black must give up an entire rook to play ...Nc6. He ends up an exchange down, and his king will not get relief either.

16...Rxf7

Exercise (simple): Here Grandelius saw that his initial idea 16...Nc6 17.Bxc6 Rxf7 doesn't work, why?

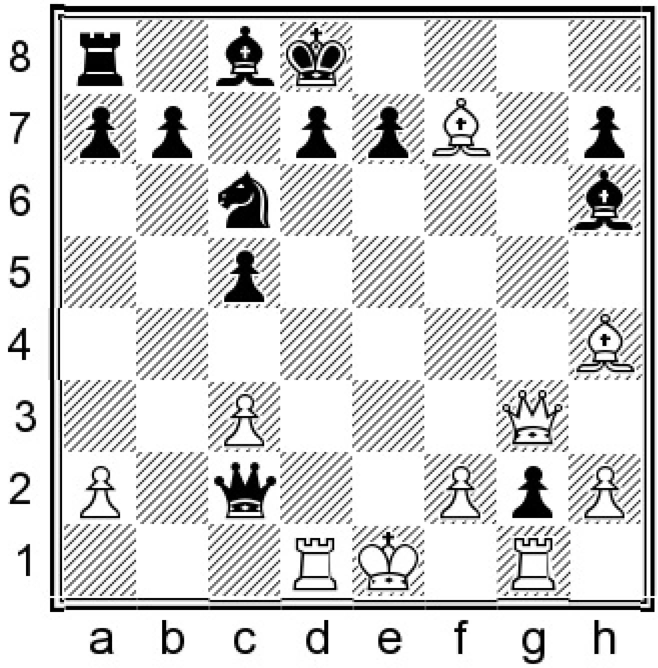
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because 18.Rxg2 leads to a mating attack.

17.Bxf7 Nc6 18.Qg3!

Controlling c7, even at the cost of the b2-pawn. Grandelius was highly impressed by this choice, with White rejecting 18.Qh8+.

18...Qxb2 19.Rd1 Qxc2



Black is not bad if we consider just the material balance. He has three pawns for the exchange, but his bigger problem hasn't disappeared: his king lacks safety.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.Bd5

The most precise move. It avoids the check on e4 and plans a timely Bxc6 to weaken e7. Black cannot play 20...d6? yet due to 21.Qxd6+, so the king's safety still can't be improved.

20...Qf5 21.Rxg2 Bf4 22.Qf3!

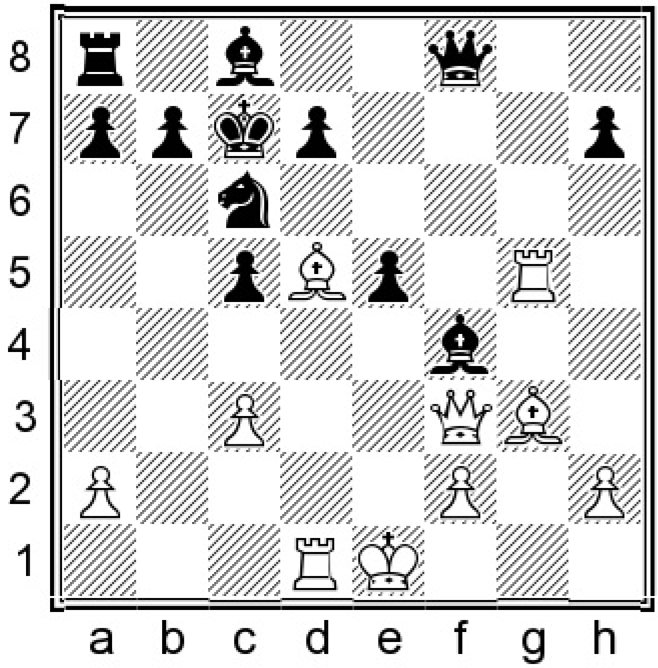
More ambitious than the spectacular 22.Qxf4 Qxf4 23.Rg8+ Kc7 24.Bg3, which was also strong, but Carlsen tries to get more from the weakened black king's situation.

22...Kc7 23.Rg5 Qf8 24.Bg3

Carlsen, even when winning, always looks for the most precise move. After the game he expressed his dissatisfaction with this move, and he suggested taking on c6 first, and only then Bg3.

Maybe it was simpler in practical play, but there is really not much difference.

24...e5



25.Rh5

A good move. 25.Bxc6 was still possible and also good, and Nils was going to answer 25...Qe7, preventing 26.Bxf4 because ...exf4 is check. However, it wouldn't have been an improvement either, as after 26.Rh5 dxc6 27.Qe4 the h5-rook enters the game and Black's position collapses.

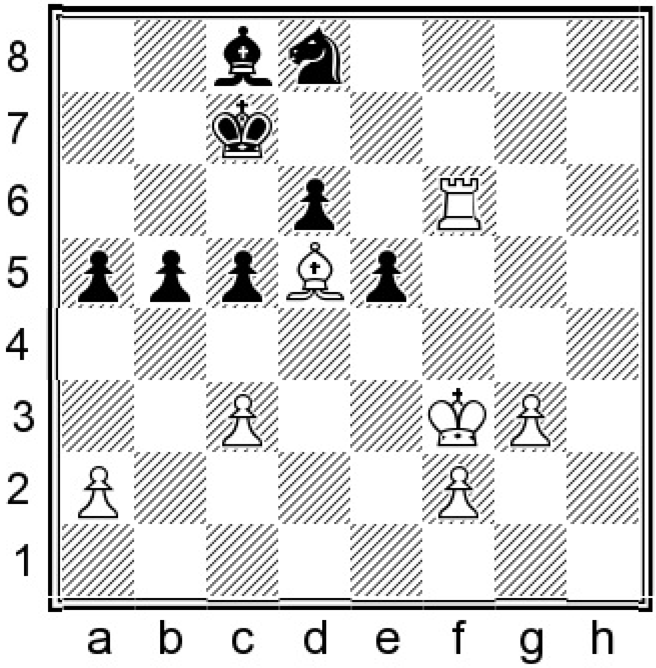
25...a5 26.Rxh7

The path Carlsen chose is not inferior to the previous suggestions. Black has no defence. The final part of the game was played under mutual time pressure, but Black didn't manage to create practical chances.

26...Ra6 27.Rf7 Qe8 28.Kf1 Bxg3 29.hxg3 Qh8 30.Kg2 Nd8 31.Rf8 Qg7 32.Rh1

Threatening 33.Rhh8 so new simplifications are unavoidable for Black.

32...Rh6 33.Rxh6 Qxh6 34.Qf6 Qxf6 35.Rxf6 d6 36.Kf3 b5



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37.g4

Sure, a passed pawn must advance.

37...Kd7 38.Rh6

1–0

The fight was out of book very early, but in this game, contrary to what normally happens in his games, Carlsen was forced into what we could call "street fighting". The enemy king was the target, and play was in a style more typical of Mikhail Tal or Carlsen's early years.

He went for these lines without hesitation, sacrificing material, and he outplayed his opponent in the complications.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) If an "ugly" move, not helping development, is needed to maintain options, then we must consider it. (7.Qc1! *7.*R*b1?*)

2.) Sometimes the position "asks for" active moves. We must be aware that sometimes they require unexpected material sacrifices to justify the decision. (8.Bc4! 10.exf6!)

3.) General considerations are put aside when precise calculation is needed. (*12...h5!* 12...Na5?)

4.) “The player who holds the advantage is obliged to attack.” (10.exf6! 16.Bh4!)

5.) After sacrificing material for better development, pressing the opponent’s position without allowing his consolidation is urgent. (11.Qf4! *11.0-0!* 16.Bh4!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

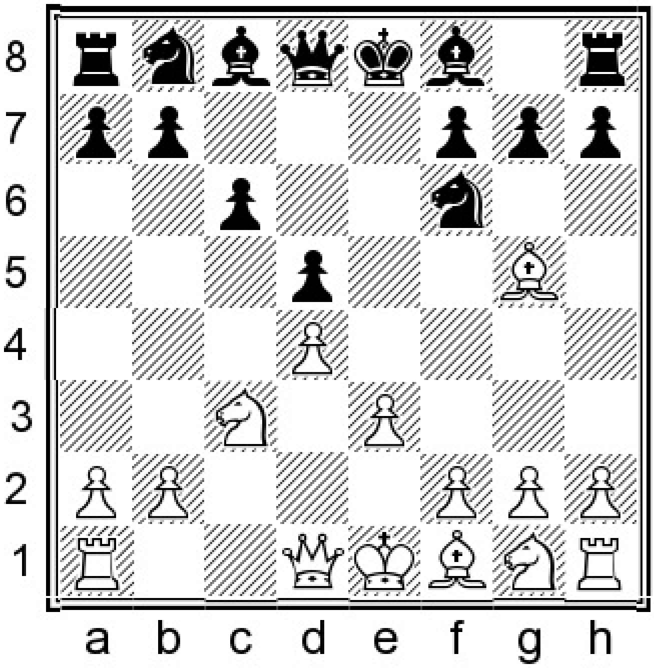
Game 20

Magnus Carlsen – Vladimir Kramnik

Queen’s Gambit [D55]

Norway Chess, Stavanger (7), 27.04.2016

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.cxd5 exd5 5.Bg5 c6 6.e3



We are in a well-known position, played regularly for more than a century. After exchanging pawns on d5 we arrive at a Carlsbad structure, where it is usual to see White playing the minority attack with a later b4 and Black playing on the kingside.

6...Bf5

After 6...Be7 White could play 7.Bd3, reaching a standard position. That would lead to a satisfactory exchange of bishops, but it is not a complete “success” for Black. This move gives the position its own character.

Exercise (simple): Show what the disadvantage of Black’s move order is.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

7.Qf3

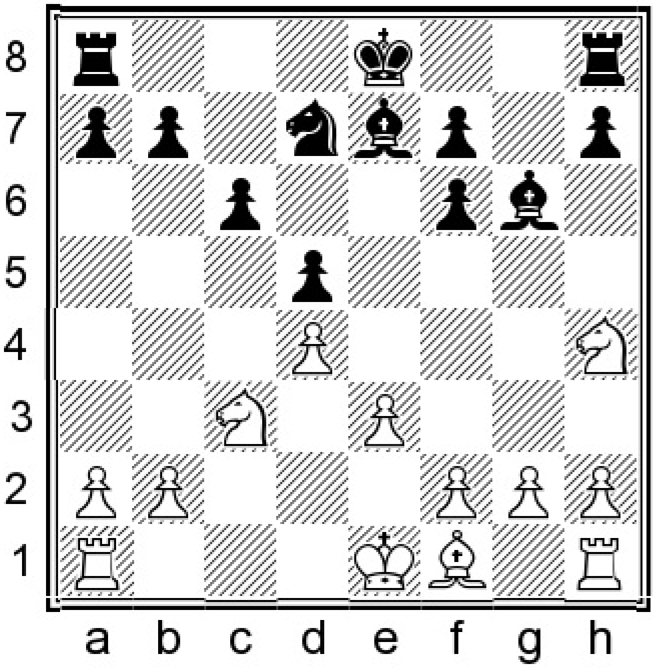
After this move Black’s kingside structure is damaged, and that is more important than the bishop pair which Black gets in return.

That said, it was not something to be feared at that moment (or later either), and Kramnik himself has played this move order elsewhere with satisfactory results, as have other strong masters such as Nigel Short.

7...Bg6 8.Bxf6 Qxf6

This is necessary. A damaged kingside is worse with the queens on the boards, but this ending was considered acceptable for Black.

9.Qxf6 gxf6 10.Nf3 Nd7 11.Nh4 Be7



Black’s position has resisted several ways to attack it, including 12.g3, when Black holds his position with a thematic knight manoeuvre: 12...Nb6 13.0-0-0 Nc8 14.Bd3 Nd6 15.Kc2 Kd7 16.f3 Bxd3+ 17.Kxd3 f5 18.Ng2 h5 19.h4 Rag8, and Black is fine, Ding Liren – Kramnik, Moscow 2014.

Another example from Kramnik’s practice continued 13.Kd2, and Black got a reasonable game in a similar way: 13...Nc8 14.Bd3 Nd6 15.b3 0-0-0 16.f3 Rhe8 17.Rac1 Kb8, Ivanisevic – Kramnik, Berlin 2015, when Black finally won.

Some days before our main game, Aronian – Harikrishna, Stavanger (blitz) 2016 continued 12.Kd2 f5 13.g3 Bxh4 14.gxh4 Ke7 15.Ne2 Nf6 16.Nf4 Nh5 17.Nh3 f4 18.Nxf4 Nxf4 19.exf4 Rhg8 20.Rg1 Bf5 21.Rg5 Kf6 22.Re1 h6 23.Rg3 Rg4 24.Rxg4 Bxg4, and it finished in a draw.

Exercise: None of these approaches allowed White to be very optimistic. What is the new idea employed now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.Ne2!

This was an idea of Ludvig Hammer, then Carlsen's second. It was found during preparation for one of the world championship matches; much later it was finally demonstrated in an important encounter, and with devastating effect.

Question: It looks strange to me, what is the idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it indeed looks strange, because normally a move which diminishes development isn't good, but here it is because White's momentary absence of coordination cannot be exploited (though this needs tactical approval).

The principal idea is to support a future Nf5 jump, neutralizing the g6-bishop and occupying a dominant position to favour the ideal location of the other pieces. Later Kramnik played it with the White pieces, too.

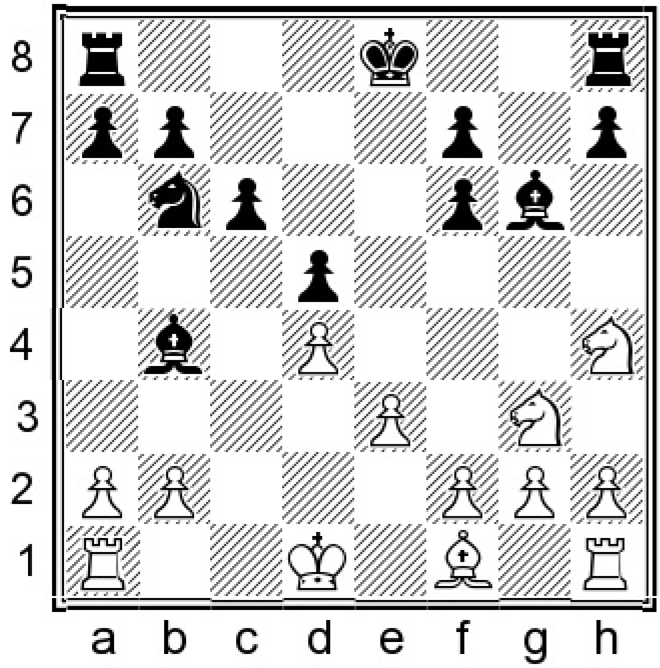
12...Nb6

Black continues his development in the most logical way.

Kramnik mentioned the possibility of 12...f5. Then White's idea was 13.g3 followed by Nf4 and "this is not what I want," Kramnik said. It would be very difficult for Black to follow this plan at the board without clear preparation on how to hold with this 'dead' bishop.

Later, in January 2020, with a few hours difference, Black tried a manoeuvre that was hard to execute without much analysis, in Goryachkina – Ju Wenjun, Women's World Championship Shanghai/Vladivostok, and in Ganguly – L'Ami, Tata Steel-B, Wijk aan Zee 2020. Black played 12...f5, and against 13.g3 the exchange of Black's best bishop followed, continuing 13...Bxh4 14.gxh4 Nf6, and after 15.Nf4 Black proposed a new exchange, 15...Nh5, remaining with a locked bishop on g6 in the first game after 16.Kd2 Nxf4 17.exf4 Ke7 18.Be2 h5, trusting in her fortress. Black succeeded, but of course to play like this you need to do a lot of homework, because normally such an approach would be rejected as "obviously bad".

13.Ng3 Bb4+ 14.Kd1



14...Na4?

A logical and attractive move. The black knight tries to add more discomfort among the white pieces, which are momentarily oddly placed. However, Carlsen's preparation will show that this is a mistake.

As this move fails, an alternative plan is needed, such as trying to fight against the forthcoming f5-knight with the typical manoeuvre we know: 14...Nc8 15.Ngf5 Nd6, which Kramnik disliked after 16.Bd3. He rejected it because Black's position was rather passive and a little worse ("a little worse forever," said Peter Svidler at the press conference after the game). Black cannot get rid of the f5-knight in good conditions.

Exercise: How did White reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15.Ngf5!

Kramnik admitted that he had missed this move: "that is the problem". His position has unexpectedly worsened significantly after two strong moves by White. Defending the b2-pawn with 15.Kc1 is not necessary and this would leave White's pieces tangled up.

15...Kd7

15...Nxb2+?! leads to a very bad ending after 16.Kc2 Nc4 (16...Na4? is worse due to 17.Kb3 Bc3

18.Rc1, winning material) 17.Bxc4 dxc4 18.Rhb1 followed by Rxb7, with a clear advantage. Kramnik suggested 18...c5 after the game, but it is not enough either. Kramnik disliked the sad 15...Nb6 too, which is understandable, but as Carlsen said, he should retreat with the knight, returning it to the game, because the alternatives were worse.

Exercise: Carlsen played the most accurate move now. Which is it?

Show/Hide Solution

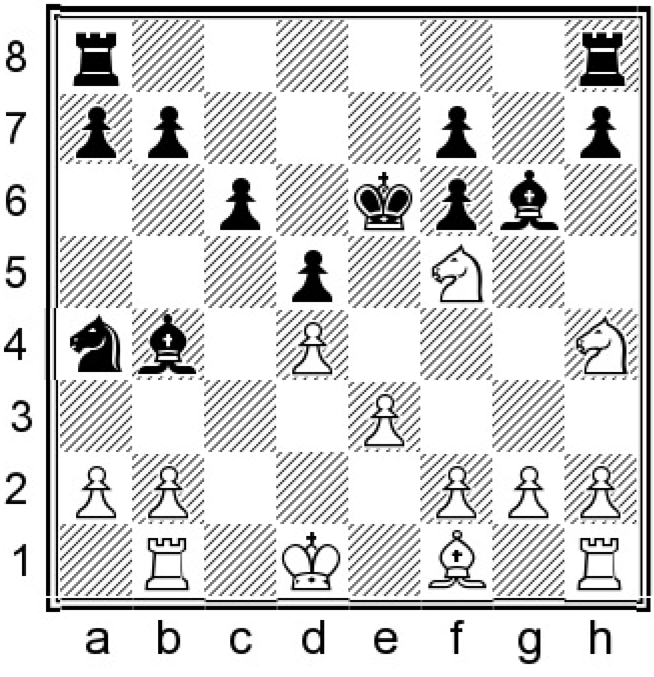
Answer:

16.Rb1!

This is possible because the diagonal of the g6-bishop is closed, and again White manages to improve his coordination without making concessions.

Kramnik was expecting 16.Kc2, but the text, leaving the c-file open, is better, and was played quickly by Carlsen, so Kramnik thought Carlsen was still in his preparation.

16...Ke6



Question: What's the king doing there?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Kramnik said he decided to try for some quick counterplay, even knowing it was probably not going to be sufficient to equalize, but that if Black didn't play something special, he was going to lose the game without a fight. White would simply play “Bd3 and all these plans” and Black would be tied up.

Black was afraid of the plan g3 and Bh3, too.

The king moves away from the a4-e8 diagonal to let Black play ...c5 without allowing Bb5+ winning.

Again, the retreat...Nb6 was objectively better, but psychologically it is difficult to make. It would admit that 14...Na4 was a mistake, and Kramnik said that Black would simply be worse.

Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen finished his regrouping?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.Bd3

Sure, White will place his pieces in ideal positions, and only badly placed pieces remain from Black’s initiative on the queenside.

17...Rhc8

Continuing with the idea of playing ...c5, although for the moment the a4-knight loses his normal square, c8, which he is meant to use to return to the center.

18.Ke2 Bf8

Waiting passively for one’s opponent to improve is something nobody likes doing, so Kramnik continues to try and conjure counterplay with ...c5. He had been hoping to be able to play 18...c5 immediately, but saw it didn’t work due to 19.a3 Ba5 20.dxc5 Nxc5?! 21.Nd4+! Kd7 22.Bxg6 hxg6 23.b4.

Exercise: How did White proceed?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.g4!

“White’s position plays itself. Black must defend passively without any prospect of equalizing,” was Carlsen’s evaluation of the position.

Kramnik thought he was just lost: “the rest is not interesting,” he concluded.

Question: Really? Is the rest so simple and uninteresting?

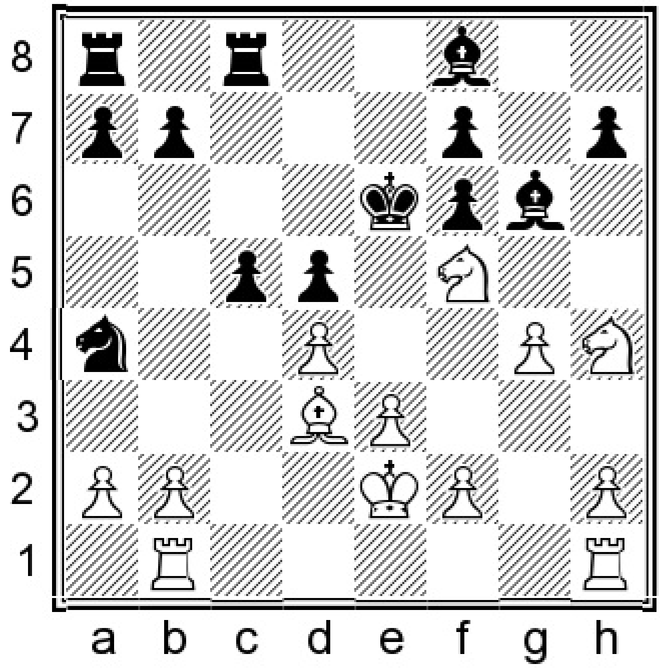
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Well, not interesting for him or for them, maybe, but for us it is.

19...c5

This was Kramnik's idea, looking for counterplay, but "it just makes his position a lot worse without offering counterchances" (Carlsen).

If now 19...Nb6 White may continue progressing by playing 20.Ng2 Bd6 21.h4.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.Ng2!

As 20...cxd4 or 20...c4 are not to be feared, Carlsen improves the position of his inactive h4-knight. It heads for f4 where it will watch d5 – a new weakness created in the black camp after 19...c5.

An added merit of this move, as we saw, is that the h-pawn is now ready to advance.

Taking on c5 was also good, but why give life to the a4-knight?

20...cxd4

Black’s position is painful after 20...c4. There could follow, for example, 21.Nf4+ Kd7 22.Bc2 Nb6 23.h4! h6 24.Nxg6 fxg6 25.Ng3, gaining a pawn.

21.exd4

Restricting the black knight again, and threatening 22.Nf4+, which wins not only a pawn but a piece after 22...Kd7 23.Bb5+.

The move played is more logical than the also good 21.Nf4+ Ke5 (21...Kd7?? 22.Bb5+) 22.Nxd4.

21...Bd6

After 21...Nb6 the same answer could follow.

Exercise (simple): What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

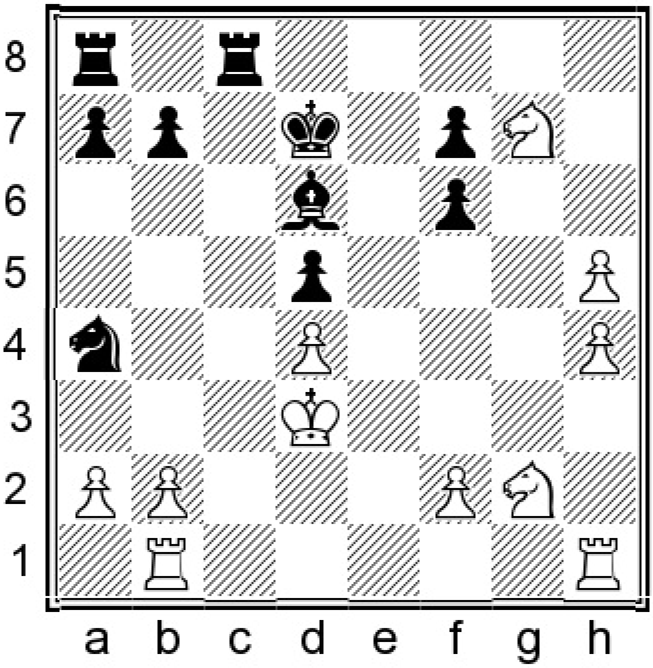
22.h4

Threatening to take the h7-pawn with 23.h5 Bxf5 24.Bxf5+.

22...h5

Black sacrifices the pawn, but without improving the situation. Anyway, 22...Rh8 23.h5 Bxf5 24.Bxf5+ Ke7 25.Ne3 Nb6 26.Kf3, followed by Re1 or Rc1, was uninspiring, too.

23.Ng7+ Ke7 24.gxh5 Bxd3+ 25.Kxd3 Kd7



White is clearly winning and Black could resign, because the result is not in doubt, but no master resigns without putting up maximum resistance.

Exercise (simple): What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Ne3

Simply, the knight is much better posted on e3, where it attacks d5 and reinforces control of f5, among other reasons.

26...Nb6 27.Ng4

Another idea was 27.Rh3-f3. Carlsen prefers to continue kicking with his knights.

27...Rh8 28.Rhe1

28.Nxf6+ Ke7 29.Ng4 was also good, but Carlsen wants to make the capture in even better conditions or force Black to adopt a more passive defence. The rook move is more annoying.

28...Be7 29.Nf5 Bd8

Obviously the bishop here doesn’t help to stop the h-pawn.

30.h6 Rc8 31.b3 Rc6 32.Nge3 Bc7 33.Rbc1

The previous move cleared the g-file, so an invasion was possible, but exchanging Black's only active piece is also very attractive.

33...Rxc1

If 33...Re6 then 34.Rg1.

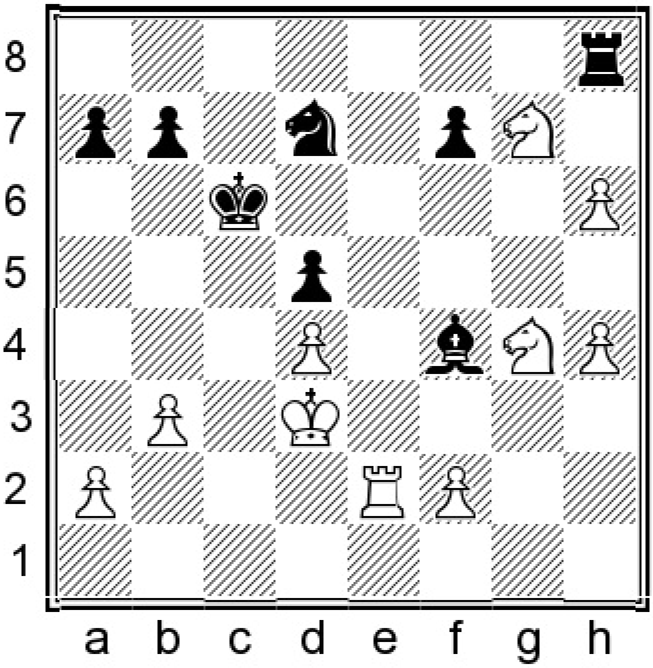
34.Rxc1 Bf4 35.Rc5 Ke6 36.Ng7+ Kd6 37.Ng4 Nd7 38.Rc2

The rook is heading for the e-file, then Re8 could be an idea, eliminating the obstacles faced by the h-pawn.

38...f5

This move doesn't improve Black's situation, but there was nothing much better either.

39.Nxf5+ Ke6 40.Ng7+ Kd6 41.Re2 Kc6



Exercise (simple): What did Carlsen play?

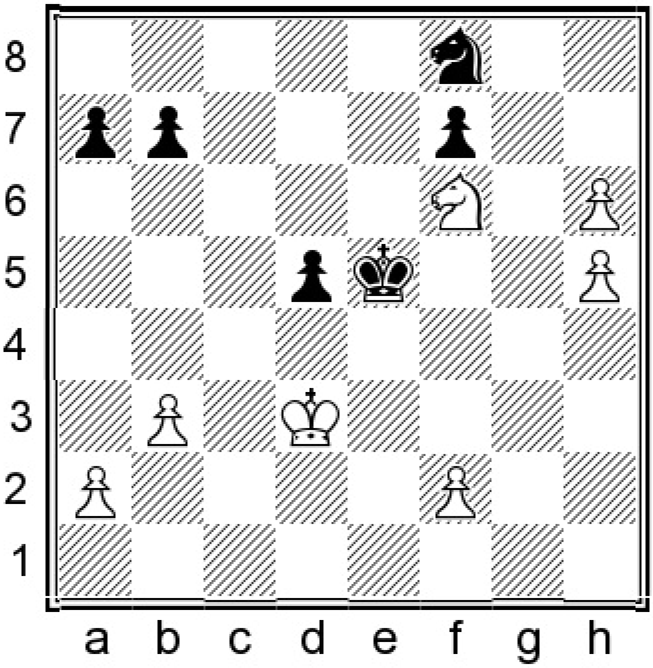
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

42.Re8

Not a surprise, right?

42...Rxe8 43.Nxe8 Nf8 44.Ne5+ Bxe5 45.dxe5 Kd7 46.Nf6+ Ke6 47.h5 Kxe5



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

48.Nd7+!

And the h-pawn queens.

48...Nxd7 49.h7 Nc5+ 50.Ke2

After this “farewell” check, Black resigned.

1–0

Kramnik gave this synopsis of the game: he said it was just bad luck. These days, it very seldom happens that a line which had been played for several decades is essentially written off. “It was considered a solid line, but now you cannot play it anymore.” Once he saw 12.Ne2, which he considered the novelty of the year, he knew he had to choose between a very unpleasant ending and trying some kind of counterplay, hoping it worked (referring to the ...c5 idea), “but I lost without a fight.”

Nonetheless, it is obvious that Carlsen had to play very well to win the game.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Neither of the players attached great importance to this game, but for us, mere mortals, it is very instructive to see how Carlsen methodically improved his position.

The fight began with 12.Ne2! to gain control of the vital f5 square. This was a move that normally wouldn't be good, because it doesn't help development.

2.) Tactics are essential to make a good idea work. (15.Ngf5!)

3.) It is hard to "turn a move back". (*15...*N*b6! 16...*N*b6!*)

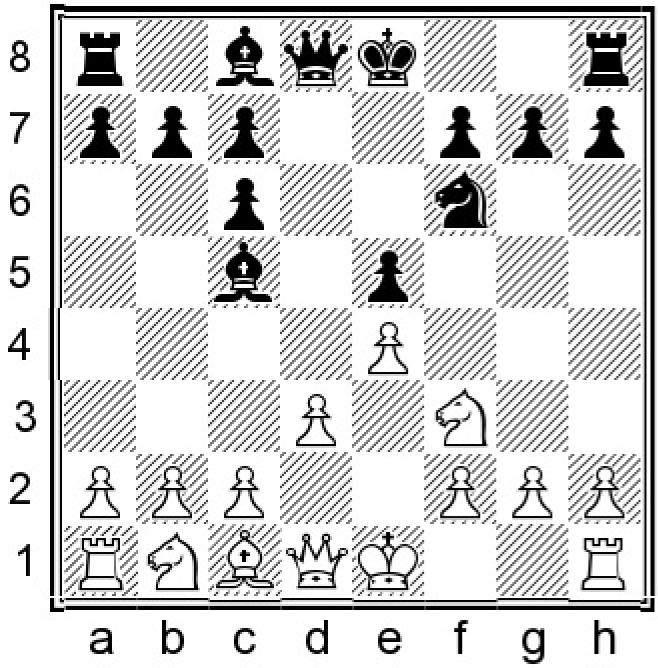
4.) "Chess is a team game." To make progress it is indispensable to regroup the pieces, putting them in ideal positions. (19.g4! 20.Ng2!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Show in Text Mode

Game 21
Magnus Carlsen – Wesley So
Ruy Lopez [C65]
Bilbao (4), 16.07.2016

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.Bxc6 dxc6



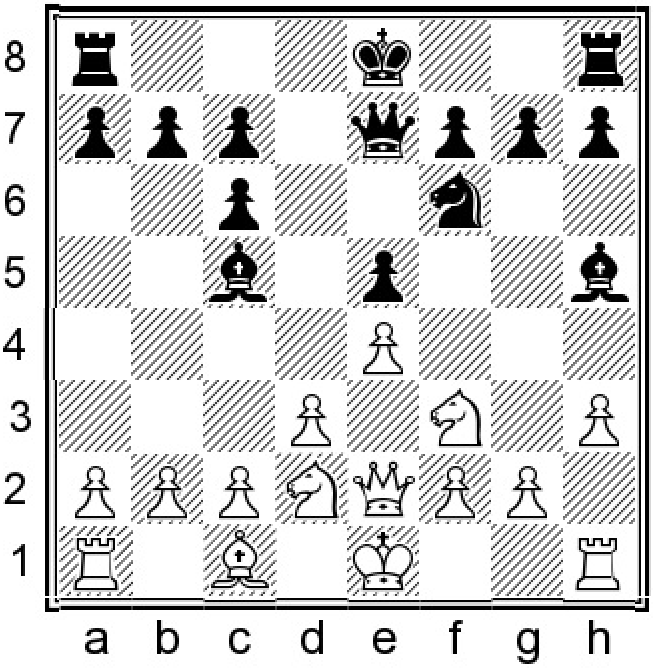
6.Qe2

Question: This move is unusual, isn’t it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There are many options for both sides, but there is a point to White’s move, naturally. Now there is a threat of 7.Nxe5, since f2 is now defended. The immediate 6.Nxe5? loses to 6...Qd4, for instance 7.Be3 Qxe5 8.d4 Qxe4 9.dxc5 Qxg2. Carlsen commented that he didn’t know which defence So would play that day, and he decided to play this line on his way to the game. Then, when it was on the board he thought, “at least I got a slightly fresh position.”

6...Qe7 7.Nbd2 Bg4 8.h3 Bh5



Question: Is this the best plan? To me, placing the bishop passively on g6 doesn't look great.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Let the World Champion answer you: "Naturally, there are plenty of other options on this and the previous move, but this plan is always decent. The bishop will be temporarily misplaced on h5/g6, but it will usually come into play via f7 after ...Nd7 and ...f6."

9.a3

Question: And what about this? Isn't White neglecting his development?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This was an improvisation at the board. Logically it would be one thing if White's last three moves were played by a novice, but quite another if they are played by the World Champion.

Carlsen thought for more than 20 minutes before deciding on this move, which is ambitious despite its modest appearance. "I won't hide the fact that playing h3 and a3 on consecutive moves in the opening gave me pleasure," commented Carlsen.

Question: What precisely is the idea behind playing 9.a3?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen explained that he needed to choose between several plans. One is to play Nf1-g3, which Anand had played in the first match for the world title, but that was without the inclusion of the moves 6.Qe2 Qe7, so that after 9.Nf1 Nd7 10.Ng3 Bxf3 11.Qxf3 g6 White would have wasted a tempo playing 6.Qe2.

Other ideas are to play g4, followed by Nf1-g3 or Nc4. However, none of these seemed very promising, so Carlsen thought up this move, with the idea of playing b4 and forcing the black bishop to choose a diagonal.

9...Nd7

Question: Why doesn't Black just prevent White's idea by playing 9...a5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This was possible, but there was a problem: Black still has to decide where to put his king; playing ...a5 would more or less rule out queenside castling. Nevertheless, Carlsen commented that it was playable "...and probably the most challenging option."

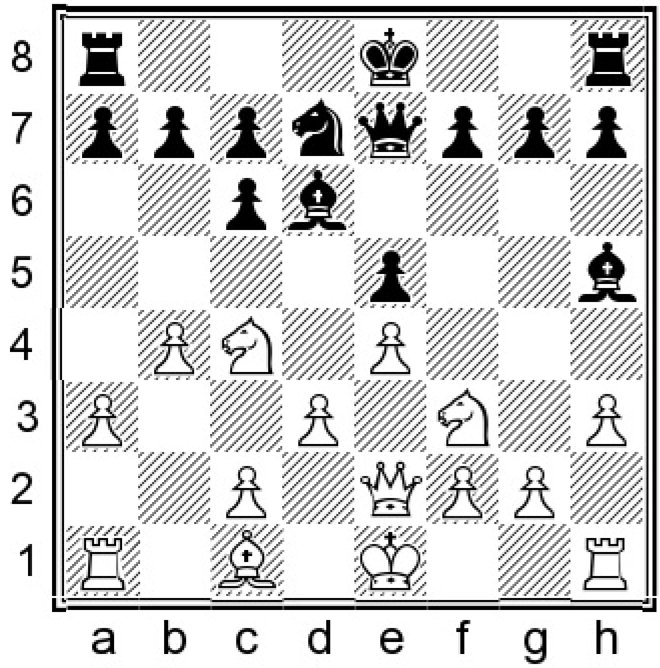
10.b4 Bd6

Black opts to keep the bishop on its original diagonal.

The other possibilities also deserved attention; the problem with 10...Bb6 is that the bishop is exposed to an eventual c4-c5 advance, which would cause a master to regard this possibility with suspicion. However, the engines aren't bothered by this, and in fact 10...Bb6 is their preferred move.

10...Bd4 was "a very solid option" according to Carlsen. Instead of the rather passive retreat to d6, the idea is to exchange the bishop after 11.Rb1 Bc3 12.0-0 Bxd2 (before the knight can escape), "But I wasn't too unhappy about this, as the extra space on the queenside feels useful," Carlsen wrote.

11.Nc4



11...f6

Here 11...Nf8 also appears playable, although after 12.Na5 Black would have to be willing to play 12...0-0-0. Black rejected this, although it doesn't appear to be worse than what he played.

Exercise: The position is approximately equal. What do you think is the continuation that's the most consistent with the plan initiated by 9.a3?

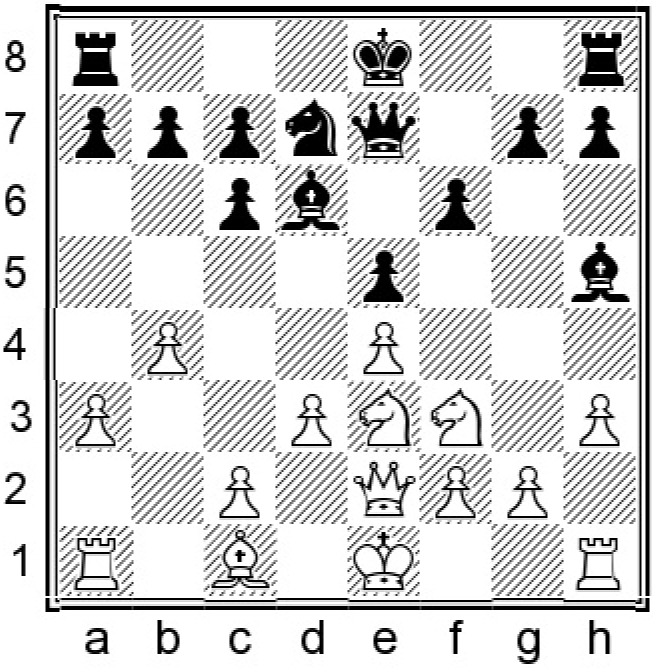
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.Ne3

This was the idea. White wanted to expel the bishop from c5, to prevent ...Bxe3. Carlsen explained that now White can play Nf5, keeping the g4-advance in reserve for when it would be clearly advantageous or necessary.

"As far as I remember, I was pretty happy with my position," he commented in a video for chess24.com.



12...a5?!

Question: Why is this dubious? Black wants to weaken White’s pawn structure.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it’s an ambitious move, but also risky. It shouldn’t be forgotten that opening files while the king is still in the centre requires careful play subsequently.

Carlsen was more critical, pointing out that this wasn’t the most practical option. “That’s why I’m assigning it a question mark, rather than for its objective value,” he wrote.

However, even objectively the typical manoeuvre 12...Nf8 was preferable, heading for f4 or d4, and after for instance 13.Nf5 Qd7 14.Be3 Ne6 Black is fine.

13.Nf5 Qf8

This is the move that’s most consistent with 12...a5, since it maintains the pressure on b4 and forces a concession on White’s part.

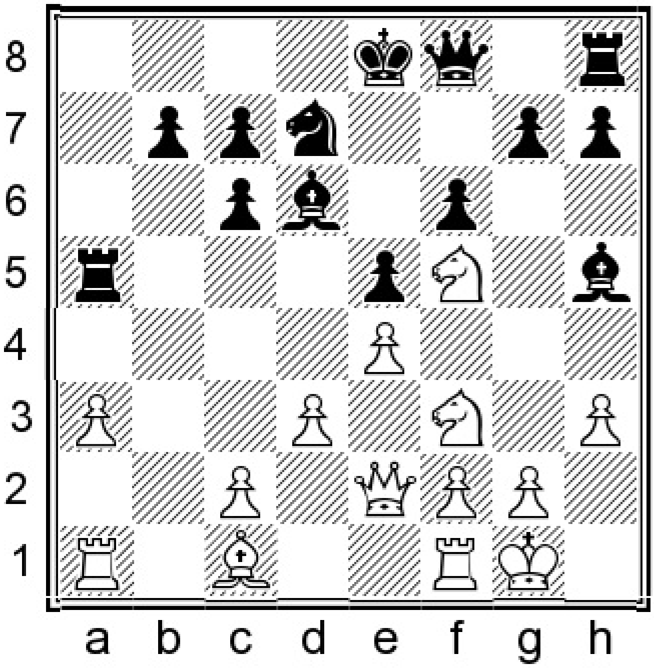
In the event of 13...Qf7 White wouldn’t take on a5, as he could play 14.Rb1 instead, keeping the structure intact, and after 14...axb4 15.axb4 0-0 16.0-0 Carlsen commented that although Black controls the a-file for the moment, the rest of his pieces aren’t so well placed in comparison with the position following 12...Nf8.

14.bxa5

“This is a strategic concession. If Black manages to castle, he could be doing very well,” said

Carlsen, and added that of course he would never take on d6 to maintain his pawn formation.

14...Rxa5 15.0-0



“Now is all about time, whether I can get something going before he completes his development, because if he does he will have a positional advantage,” said Carlsen. He pointed out the difficulties Black faces in reorganizing his position. The most important point is that he lacks two moves to castle, while the a5-rook and the b7-pawn are undefended. Those are tactical weaknesses and it is necessary to keep them in mind.

15...Qf7?!

A tempo loss if he wants to castle or play ...Nf8.

Question: This looks like a decent idea; why is it dubious? Is there anything better?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This move isn’t entirely positive, considering that safeguarding the king is starting to become an increasingly urgent priority. Also note that 16...0-0 isn’t going to be possible anyway, due to 17.Bh6!.

The far from obvious 15...Kd8 was worth consideration, seeking refuge on the queenside; the game might continue 16.Bd2 Ra4 or 16.a4 Bb4, “and in both cases it’s not so easy to generate a serious initiative on the queenside” (Carlsen).

16.a4 Nc5

We already know that 16...0-0? is answered with 17.Bh6.

Exercise: What plan did Carlsen initiate at this point?

Show/Hide Solution

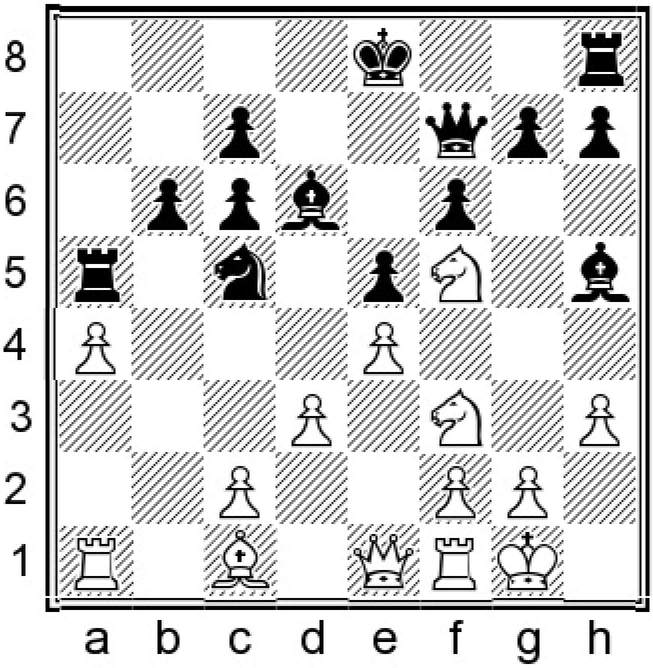
Answer:

17.Qe1!

"17.Bd2 was also good, but this move, freeing up the knight and attacking the rook, just felt too natural not to be played" (Carlsen). 17.Bd2 would have the idea of continuing with moves such as Rfb1 or Be3, depending on Black's response, and then d4 at the right moment. Carlsen's idea is different.

17...b6

It isn't possible to play 17...Rxa4? due to 18.Rxa4 Nxa4 19.Qa5, winning. If 17...Ra8 Carlsen intended 18.N3h4, to play Nxd6 at the right moment and then place the other knight on f5. After for instance 18...Bf8 then 19.a5 "fixing b7 as a target, 19...g5 20.Nf3 Bxf3 21.gxf3 and White is firmly in the driver's seat," (Carlsen); while if 18...Ne6 then 19.Rb1 and it's difficult for Black to hold the position.



Exercise: What's White's follow-up to 17.Qe1?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.Nd2!

A pawn sacrifice to activate his forces and try to exploit Black’s delay in development.

18...Rxa4

Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.Nc4

“The idea. Every move comes with a threat” (Carlsen). He is able to activate the knight ‘for free’, thanks to the threat to take on d6.

19...Bf8?!

If 19...Kd7 then, among other moves, 20.Nfxd6 wins, due to 21.Nxb6+.

If this is the best Black can do, incarcerating the rook on h8, the position is clearly more than dubious.

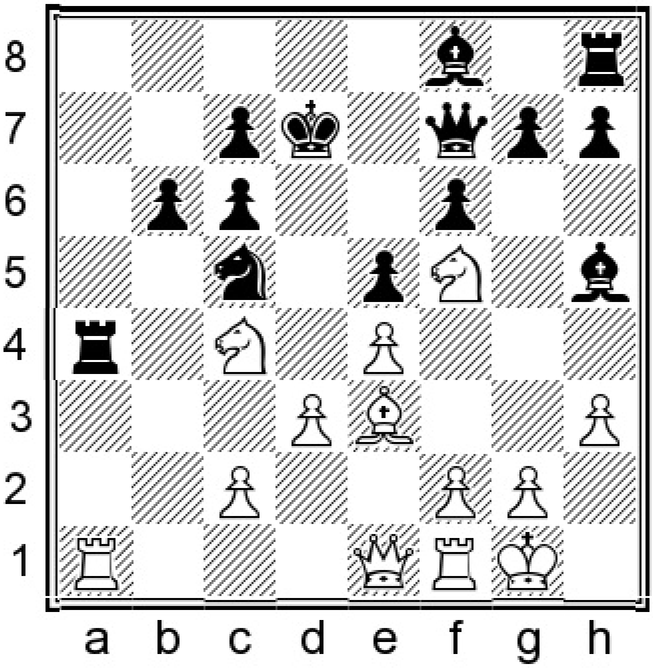
19...Be7 was preferable. Then after 20.Be3, 20...0-0? loses to 21.Nxe7+ Qxe7 22.Bxc5, so Black needs to play 20...Kd7, when 21.Rxa4 Nxa4 22.f4 would give White a strong initiative, but Black could offer more resistance than in the game.

20.Be3!

Another move with a threat; the idea is 21.Bxc5 Rxa1 22.Qxa1, allowing White to infiltrate decisively with the queen and then the rook.

Now 20...Rg8 was the most tenacious, to prevent the rook being loose on h8 and to be able to recapture with the bishop on c5, but after 21.f4 the black position is indefensible from the practical point of view, as Carlsen pointed out; and in addition White objectively has a clear advantage.

20...Kd7



Exercise: How did White increase the pressure?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.Qc3!

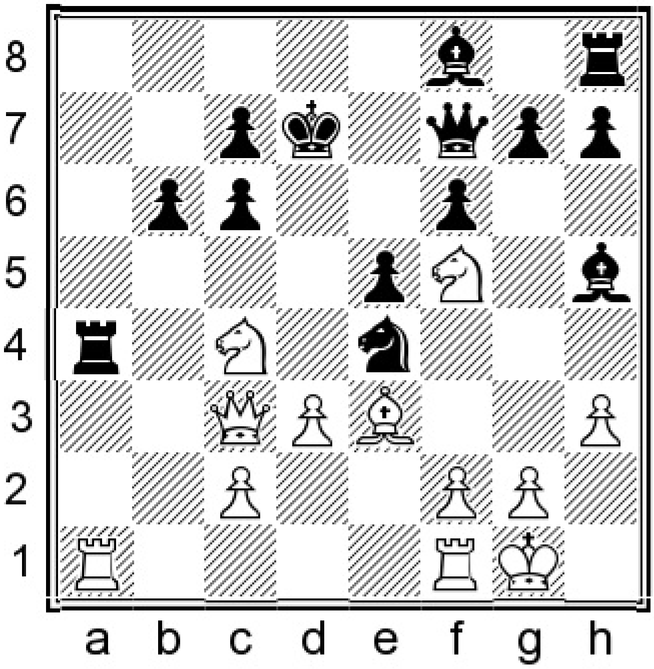
Bringing the queen into play and connecting the rooks. “All natural moves, and by now I felt that I was winning” (Carlsen). The threat is 22.Nxb6+! cxb6 23.Bxc5 Rxa1 24.Rxa1 Bxc5 25.Ra7+, winning the queen.

21...Nxe4

Question: Agreeing to a ‘hand to hand’ fight doesn’t inspire confidence in me. Wasn’t it better to sacrifice the exchange and relieve the pressure with 21...Rxc4?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You’re right; perhaps this was the best practical chance, but it wouldn’t save Black, because all the white pieces still come into play after 22.dxc4 Nxe4 23.Qd3+ Nd6 24.g4! Bg6 25.Rfd1, threatening 26.Bxb6 cxb6 27.Ra7+; 25...c5 can be answered with 26.Ra7, or first 26.Bxc5 bxc5 27.Ra7, with a decisive attack.



Exercise (simple): There are several good moves. Which is the most crushing?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22.Nxb6+!

“Again, opening up the seventh rank, and leaving the black king completely naked” (Carlsen).

22...cxb6 23.dxe4 Qc4 24.Qd2+ Kc7

24...Ke6 also loses, for instance to 25.Rxa4 Qxa4 26.Qd8 Qxe4 27.Qc8+ Kf7 28.Ra1.

25.g4

“Finally g4! Much later than expected, but much more powerful” (Carlsen)**.**

25...Bg6 26.Rfd1

This was the idea of 25.g4. “I had no wish to calculate Bxb6 here or on the previous move, as this forces immediate resignation,” commented Carlsen.

There is no defence. 26...Bxf5 fails to 27.Qd8+ Kb7 28.Qxb6+, mating; 26...Ba3 loses to 27.Rxa3 Rxa3 28.Qd6+.

1–0

Early tactical complications are not common in the Berlin variation, and this game was no exception. Two seemingly innocuous moves were played by Carlsen in the opening. He was especially happy with those pawn moves h3 and a3, and they were much more dangerous that one could expect.

He played better in the complex positional battle that arose, gained a dynamic advantage, then sacrificed a pawn to try to exploit the lack of development of his opponent and (again) he won by a mating attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It is useful to force the enemy bishop to choose only one diagonal. (9.a3! 10.b4!)

2.) The king's safety is almost always one if the most important factors of the position. (12...a5? 15...Qf7? *15...*K*d8!*)

3.) Be careful if you want to postpone a healthy and known plan for a "new" one. (12...a5? *12...*N*f8!*)

4.) To exploit the bad situation of the opponent's king sometimes requires energetic measures. (18.Nd2! 22.Nxb6+!)

5.) Finally, remember Carlsen's general advice: "You should castle. Sometimes delaying development (as in this game), in order to obtain positional goals can be profitable, but it is very risky and most of all it forces you to play so precisely later on, it is just not something a lot of people want to do... "

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

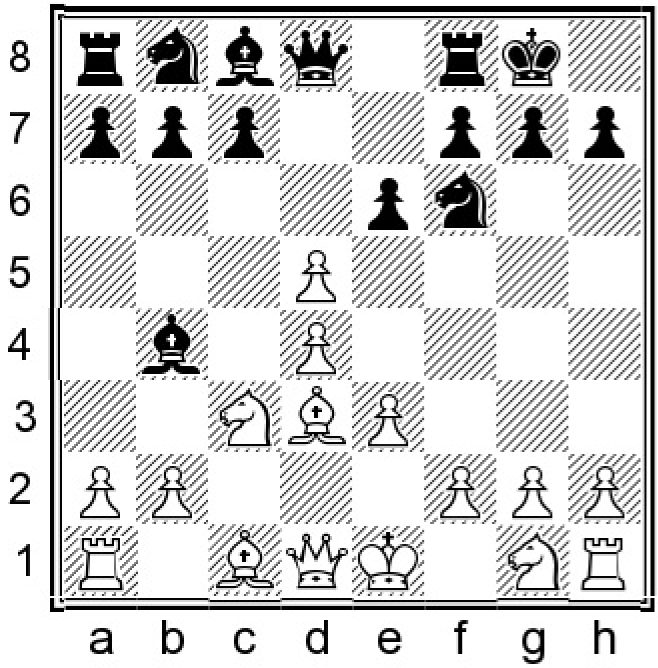
Game 22

Magnus Carlsen – Sergey Karjakin

Nimzo-Indian Defence [E48]

Norway Chess, Stavanger (8), 15.06.2017

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e3 0-0 5.Bd3 d5 6.cxd5



Question: Why eliminate the tension instead of the natural 6.Nf3?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There are several possibilities. This is not the most popular, but there is an idea behind it, of course, and it is fully playable.

6...exd5 7.Nge2

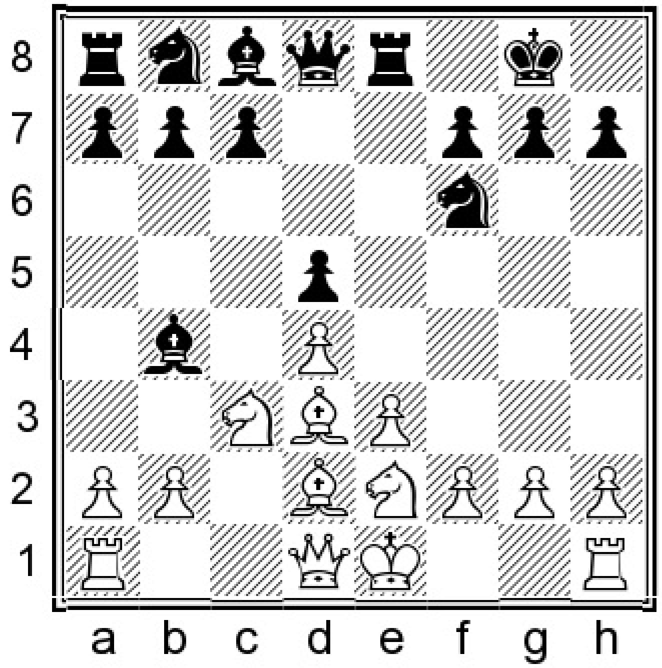
This was the idea. The knight is especially well situated on e2 if the game transposes to a Saemisch Variation, e.g. in case Black answers a3 with ...Bxc3, then White would prepare e4 with f3 and Ng3.

7...Re8

Black shows he will not cooperate with White's idea by taking on c3; the f8 square is vacant for the b4-bishop. Black also occupies the opened e-file, taking advantage of the exchange 6.cxd5.

White now delays short castling to accelerate his development, preparing Rc1.

8.Bd2



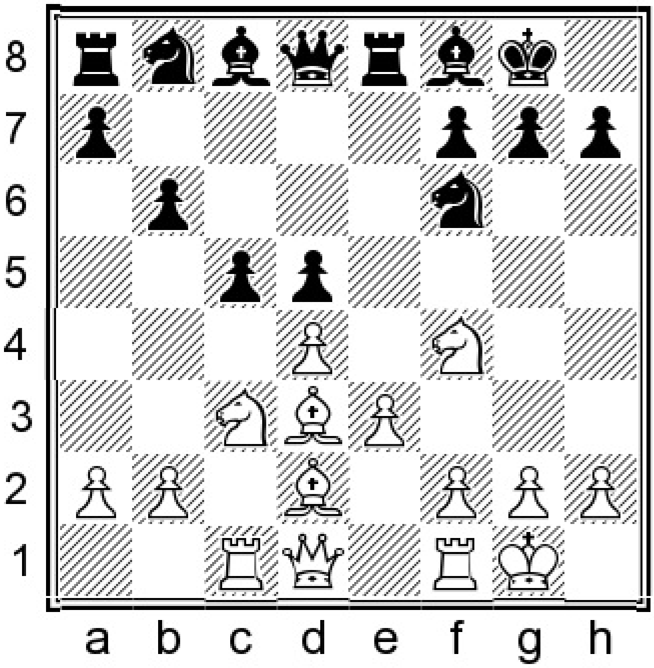
8...Bf8

This was the idea, although 8...Bd6 is also played. One of its ideas would be to try to show the drawback of developing the knight on e2 by playing ...Ng4. The most precise answer to that move would be 9.Rc1.

9.0-0 b6

Black prepares ...c5. The bishop is better posted on f8 than on d6 for this purpose, as the d5-pawn is better defended.

10.Rc1 c5 11.Nf4



11...Bb7

11...Ba6 has also been played. The exchange of the d3-bishop is attractive, but we must remember that once ...c5 is played, after that exchange, the d5-pawn loses important support.

Nonetheless, 11...c4 is another interesting idea.

Exercise (simple): How did White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.Qf3

Sure, pressing d5. 12...c4 is no longer possible due to 13.Bxc4.

12...Na6

A typical answer: the knight heads for c7 to overprotect d5, though the sharp 12...Nc6 is sometimes played too, temporarily sacrificing the d5-pawn, as well as the ambitious 12...Bc6, renewing the idea of playing ...c4 with the bishop defended.

13.Rfd1 cxd4

Exercise: Why not immediately play 13...Nc7, leaving the center intact?

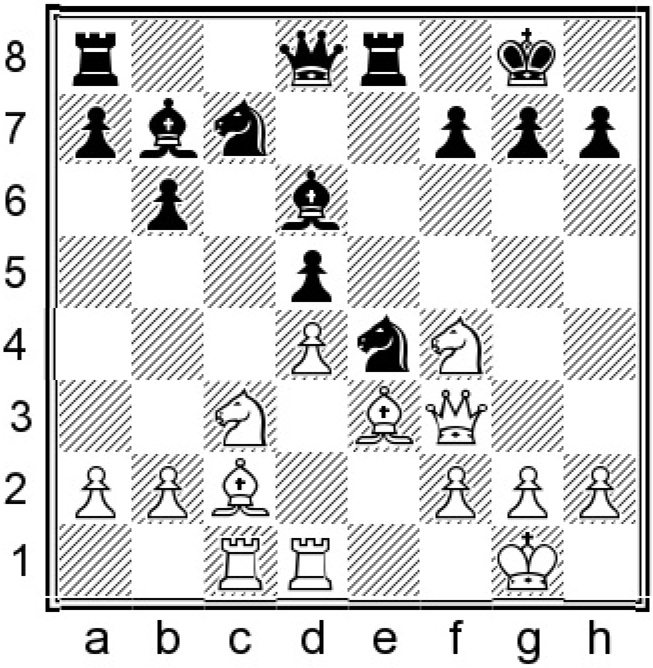
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because the black structure is weak after 14.dxc5! bxc5 (or 14...Bxc5 15.Nce2, with the idea of Bc3, and the black pieces are not well posted for an isolated d-pawn structure) 15.Na4 followed by 16.Ba5 and weakening of the pawn chain is unavoidable. After 15...Bc8 16.h3 Black's situation is still awkward.

14.exd4 Nc7 15.Bc2

White has several options. His idea is to increase the pressure over d5 from b3, though the engines prefer other moves, including 15.a3, 15.Nb5 and 15.Re1. The text is perhaps the most "human", because White wants to press Black's position with a concrete plan. It is possible that the engines don't fear it because they see a good tactical reply.

15...Bd6 16.Be3 Ne4!



Black responds very well, occupying good positions with his pieces. Now the black queen can head for the kingside.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.Ba4!

Forcing a small concession: the position is about equal, but, like Lasker, Carlsen continuously creates difficulties for his opponent or forces him to take critical decisions.

17...Re7

Black decides to maintain his structure. White can be satisfied because the h4-d8 diagonal is temporarily closed.

The alternative was to exchange the proud centralized knight, playing 17...Nxc3 followed by ...b5.

18.Bb3

A rather surprising move: it is true the bishop is more active here than on a4, but White could improve the position with useful moves like 18.g3 or 18.h3 before withdrawing it.

18...Qd7

After the bishop moves this square is available, without fearing 19.Nfxd5 due to 19...Nxd5 20.Bxd5 Bxd5 21.Nxd5 Bxh2+ 22.Kxh2 Qxd5 with a good position.

19.h3

There is nothing concrete so it is time to create a luft.

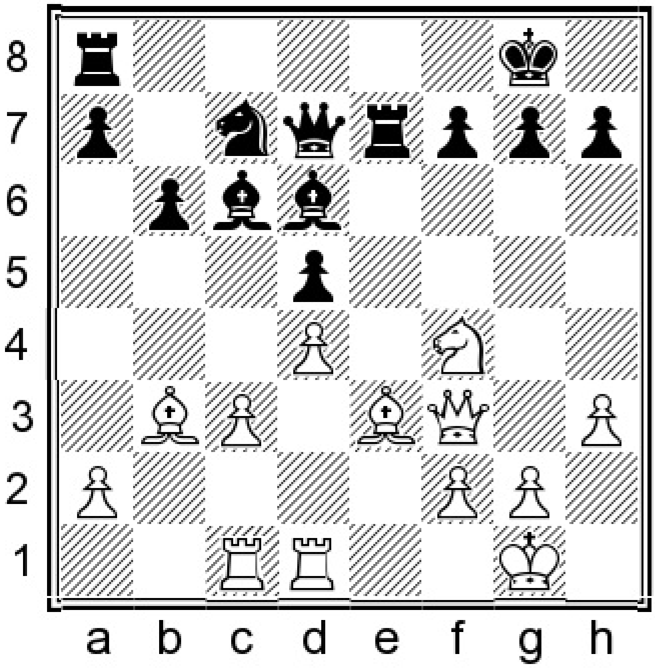
19...Nxc3 20.bxc3

Playing like Lasker again. White wants to sharpen the game with a timely c4. He considered that his chances would not be better playing the quieter line 20.Rxc3 Rae8.

20...Bc6

Black defends his bishop, stopping c4, and making the move ...Ba4 available for the future.

The alternative was 20...Rae8.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

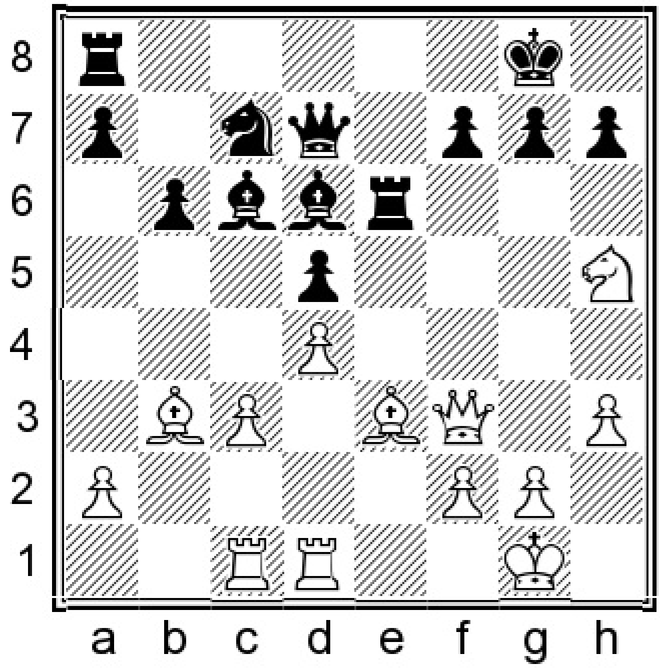
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.Nh5

The pressure against the weak d-pawn cannot be increased, so White begins to aim for the rather unprotected black king.

21...Re6



With this good defensive move Black neutralizes all tactical strikes along the third rank, such as 22.Bh6.

Exercise: How should White play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22.Bc2?

Thinking only about attack. It was necessary to play the prophylactic 22.Re1 first, then Black's next reply would be pointless.

22...Ba4!

Question: I don't understand it. This exchange is obviously good for Black, isn't it? I doubt Carlsen thought otherwise, so what is the explanation?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, 22.Bc2? was a mistake. Not a terrible one, and quite infrequent in Carlsen's practice. The most plausible explanation for that is the poor form Carlsen displayed in this tournament as a whole. He was probably at the lowest point of his career since he rose to the top of the chess elite. Indeed, he was in danger of losing the number 1 spot in the Elo list, something that had been unbelievable till then, and in the tournament at that moment he was on minus 1 without a single win.

Exercise: Well, anyway, nothing is lost yet. Carlsen answered in Lasker's style again, how?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23.c4

With this pawn sacrifice, sharpening the fight.

Question: But, is this better than quiet moves like 23.Bb3 or maybe 23.Bxa4 Qxa4 24.Bf4?

Show/Hide Solution

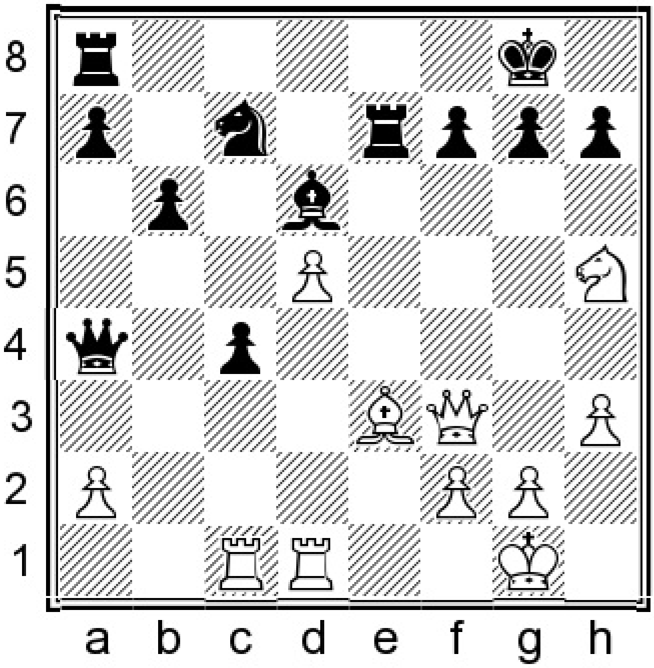
Answer: No, it isn't, and maybe objectively it is even slightly worse. But we know, especially through Lasker, that objectivity is frequently not the most important factor at the chessboard.

It is an ambitious sacrifice. It obliges Black to defend accurately and we know that in time pressure, even for very strong players, to play correctly in a complicated position isn't always easy.

23...dxc4 24.d5 Rg6!

Black continues with his strong defence.

24...Re7? was bad due to 25.Bxa4 Qxa4.



After driving the black queen away White has the crushing 26.Nxg7!, e.g. 26...Kxg7 27.Bh6+! Kg6

28.Bg5! Ne8 (or 28...Kxg5 29.h4+! Kxh4 30.Rd4+, winning) 29.Bxe7 Bxe7 30.Qe4+, winning.

If 26...Rxe3 then 27.Qxe3 Kxg7 28.Qg5+ Kf8 29.Rd4 or the immediate 28.Rd4, with a decisive attack.

25.Bd4

Adding more pressure. Not 25.Bxg6? fxg6 26.Ng3 Bxd1 and there is no compensation for the pawn.

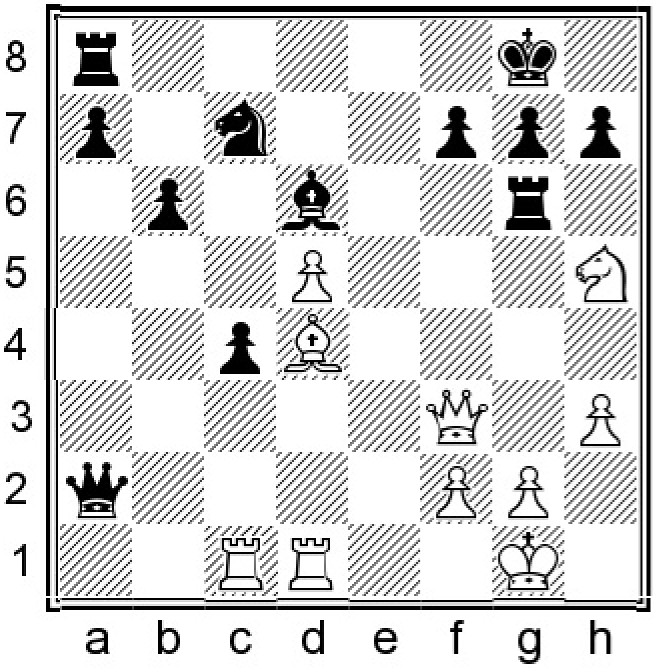
The engines prefer the quieter 25.Bxa4 Qxa4 26.Nf4 Rf6 27.Qg4, even though Black is fine and the position is less complex after the solid 27...Ne8 or even the sharper 27...Qxa2. The text move obliges Black to play with more care.

25...Bxc2 26.Rxc2 Qa4 27.Rcc1 Qxa2?!

Karjakin’s trust in his calculations is objectively correct, but from the practical point of view the situation is different, especially considering the time trouble from which both players were suffering.

Anyway, Karjakin didn’t do justice here to his nickname the Russian “Minister of Defence”.

After the prophylactic move 27...Ne8!, Black’s defence would be more comfortable and he would have kept the advantage. Karjakin of course saw this, but he was not very impressed, as he believed White had enough chances anyway.



Exercise: Carlsen emulates Lasker again with his next move, which one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28.Nxg7!

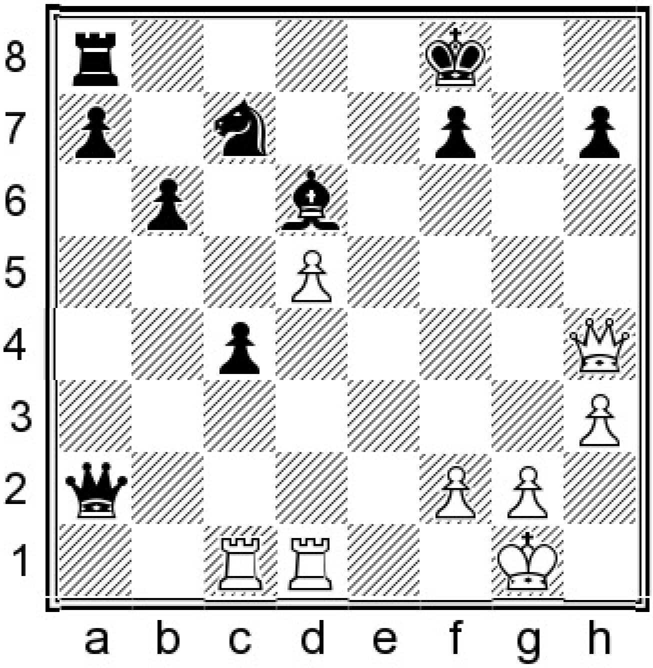
Sure, there is no way back. The kingside is weakened and the position becomes very complicated.

28...Rxg7 29.Bxg7 Kxg7 30.Qg4+ Kf8

Better than 30...Kh8 31.Qd7, because it defends f7. The f7-pawn is more important because the black king remains better protected on f8.

31.Qh4

Forced. 31.Qd7? Ne8 was simply bad, as f7 is defended.



31...Qb2?!

Time pressure begins to affect the quality of the moves.

Question: But this move looks fine. It prepares the queen's return to the defence, so why is it dubious?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it is objectively good, but now tactics may decide the game.

More precise, in practice, was 31...Ne8!, and if 32.Qxh7 then 32...Qb2, while after 32.Rxc4 Black has the stronger 32...Qe2!, planning ...h5 or ...Qe5, with an excellent game.

32.Rxc4?!

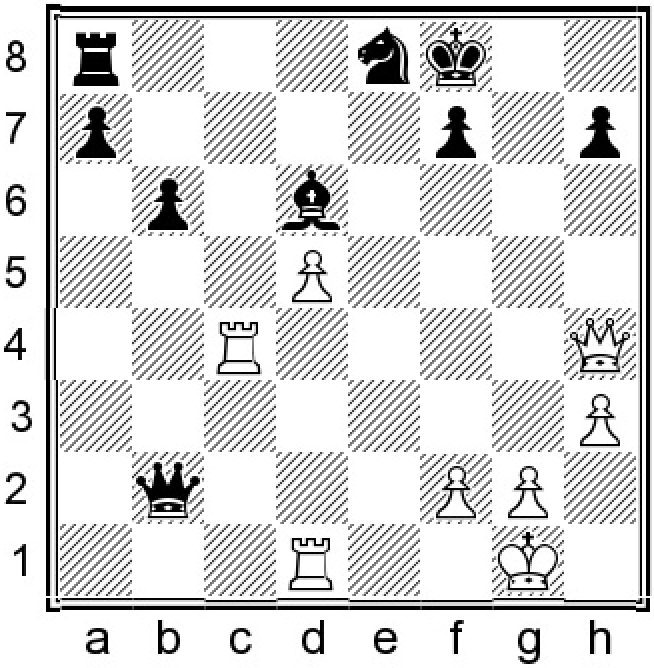
A logical move. It brings the rook into the game, but it's not so good for tactical reasons.

It was necessary to play 32.Qh6+ first, forcing 32...Ke7 to defend the bishop and only then 33.Rxc4. Black could play 33...Qe5, and after 34.f4 Qe2 (or 34...Qe3+ 35.Kh2, threatening 36.Rxc7+ and 37.d6+) 35.Rdd4 the position would be very complicated, hard to play in mutual time trouble, with balanced chances.

32...Ne8?!

Also, a logical move. The knight joins the defence, but it is not the best choice.

The engines show that Black could improve the situation of his king by playing 32...Kg7!, although "it is not a natural move" (Nigel Short). White could then try 33.Qg5+ Kh8 34.Rxc7 Bxc7 35.d6, but after 35...Bd8 36.Qd5 Rc8 37.Qxf7 Black can advantageously reorganize his forces by playing 37...Bh4 followed by ...Qf6 or ...Rg8.



Exercise: The position remains unclear. Carlsen made a Laskerian move again, which one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

33.Re1

There is no advantage after this move, but it maintains the tension. In some lines it is possible to play Qh6+ followed by Rxe8+ and Qxd6.

White could aspire to a draw at most after 33.Qxh7 Qg7 34.Qh4 Qf6 35.Qh7 Qg7, but Black could seek more by playing 34...Be7 and ...Rd8.

33...Qf6

With more time at his disposal, Black would probably have looked for more hidden ideas like 33...Qd2 34.Rce4 h5! 35.Qxh5 Nf6 36.Qh8+ Ng8, followed by 37...Bc5 or 37...a5, but... who dares to play something like this in time trouble without enough time to analyse it?

Exercise: Both players were clearly playing for a win up till now. How did Carlsen proceed?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34.Qxh7

There is nothing better. Of course not 34.Rxe8+?? Rxe8 35.Qxf6 due to 35...Re1#.

34...Qg7 35.Qc2

A surprising retreat. The problem with the more "active" move 35.Qf5 is 35...Qf6 and it would be necessary to withdraw, or repeat moves after 36.Qh7 Qg7.

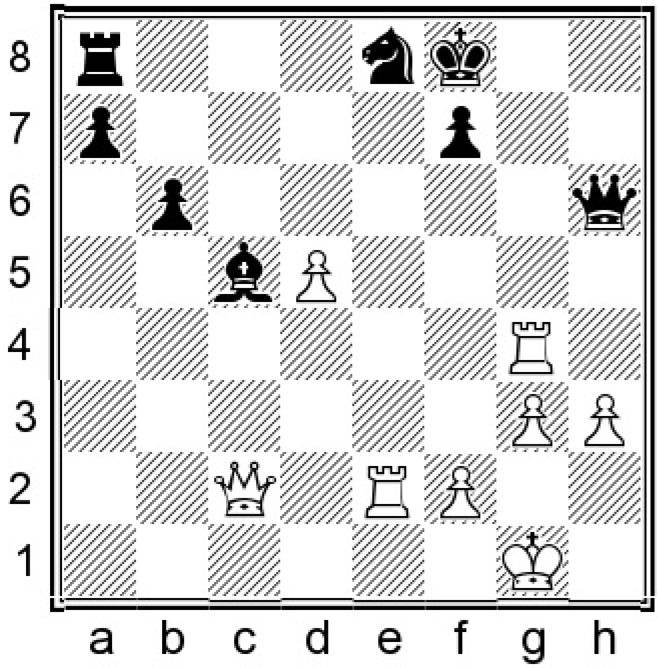
35...Qf6

Inviting White to repeat moves with 36.Qh7. 35...Qg6 was more ambitious.

36.Rg4

Maintaining the tension again. The engines believe that 36.Qh7 was the best move, but Carlsen is trying to obtain more, and in time trouble anything is possible.

36...Bc5! 37.Re2 Qh6 38.g3



38...Nf6!

And Black improves the position of his pieces: he is fine.

After the game Karjakin commented that he thought Carlsen had committed a blunder: he intended to play 38...Qxh3 because he thought Carlsen hadn't seen that 39.Rh4?? loses to 39...Qxg3+.

Exercise: Why didn't he play 38...Qxh3, then?

Show/Hide Solution

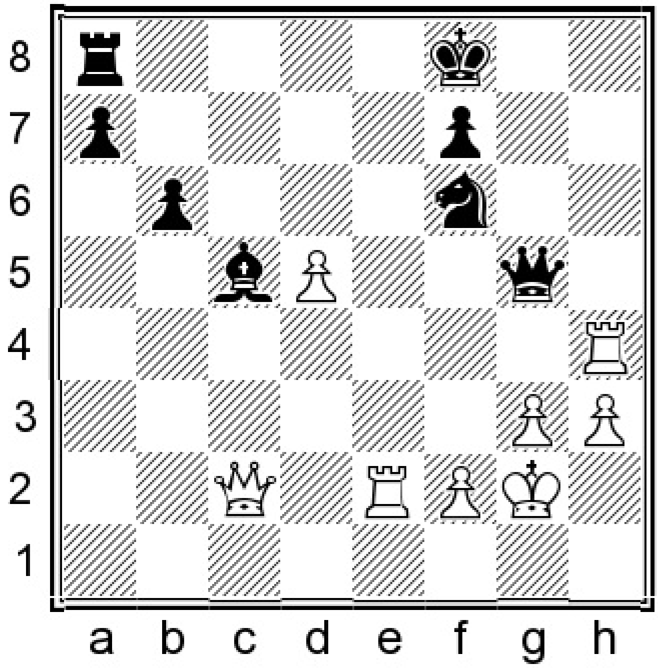
Answer: Because of 39.Qf5! (threatening 40.Rg8+) if 39...Qh6 or 39...Qh8 then 40.Rh4 follows, with all the white pieces attacking.

39.Rh4 Qg7 40.Kg2 Qg5?!

The last move before time control. 40...Rd8 was more logical, but Karjakin didn't like 41.Re5.

With more time at his disposal he would have seen that Black can play 41...Rxd5 or even the surprising 41...Bxf2!, taking advantage tactically of the defenceless e5-rook.

40...Nxd5! was also good, but calculating it with just a few seconds left was not easy at all.



Exercise: The mutual time pressure was over, safely reaching the time control. Carlsen thought for 12 minutes, so what did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

41.Qc3!

Creating difficulties for his opponent once more. Planning Re5, or in some lines d6 followed by Qf3, and all the white pieces are attacking again.

41...Bd6?

Black blundered after the time control and after thinking 27 minutes.

Question: That is very odd, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Amazingly it is not so infrequent. Once the extreme tension of time trouble abates, even strong masters commit greater mistakes than in the previous part of the game.

Karjakin explained after the game that he was looking for something to try and win almost all the time, and as he didn't find it he decided to "secure the draw". However, his calculation had a flaw in it, as we shall see.

41...Qxd5+ 42.Kh2 was not advisable, after e.g. 42...Qg5 43.Rh8+ Ng8 44.Re5 all the black pieces are too passive, and 42...Qd6 43.Rf4 is no better.

Exercise: “As soon as he played it, I knew I was going to win,” was what Carlsen said after the game. What did he play now?

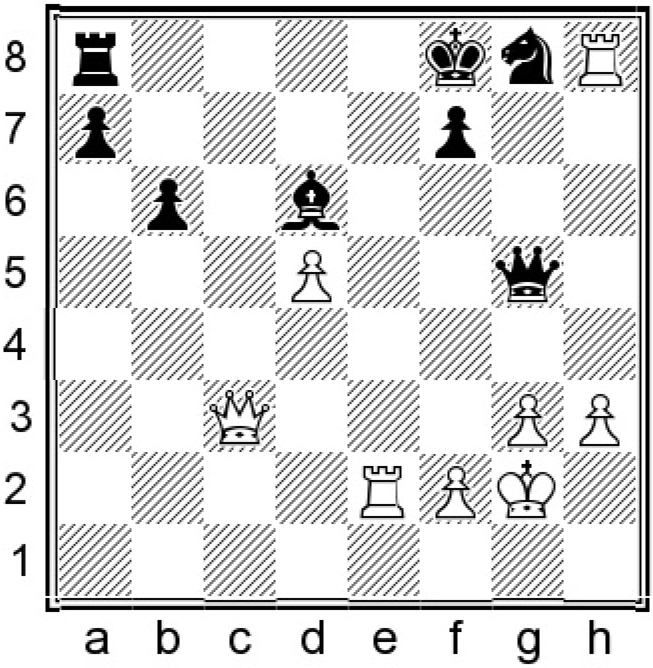
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

42.Rh8+!

Soon we shall clearly see that Black’s most accurate previous move was to avoid this check, playing 41...Qg7!

42...Ng8



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

43.Re4!

The most direct way, threatening 44.Rg4. If 43...Qxd5, pinning the rook, then 44.Qf3! is devastating.

43...Qg7

Exercise: What did Karjakin overlook when he played 41...Bd6?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

44.Rxg8+!

This is the “knockout punch”. If 44...Kxg8 then 45.Rg4, while if 44...Qxg8 then 45.Qf6! Bc5 (or 45...Qg6 46.Qh8+ Qg8 47.Qh6+) 46.Rg4 Qh7 47.d6 Re8 48.d7, winning.

1–0

Carlsen came up with an interesting position after the opening. He didn’t play accurately and got a worse position. He didn’t defend passively but, with true Laskerian spirit, he complicated the game drastically.

Objectively it was not the best approach, but it was not easy to punish it at the board with limited time to think. In the complications, with both players playing for a win, Carlsen emerged triumphant once more. This is one of the more Laskerian games of the book.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) All chess players commit inaccuracies and even big mistakes, even Lasker and Carlsen. (22.Bc2? *22.*R*e1!* 32.Rxc4? *32.*Q*h6+!*)

2.) In those situations, both Lasker and Carlsen used to continue playing for a win. Their main goal was/is to maintain or increase the tension, in equal or even slightly worse positions, without trying just to equalize. (20.bxc3! 23.c4! 33.Re1!)

3.) They also complicate(d) the game tactically, so the objective inferiority of the position is harder to prove. (21.Nh5!, 28.Nxg7!)

4.) In such complicated positions, it is even more important to be alert, ready to play unexpected tactical blows. (28.Nxg7! 41.Qc3! 44.Rxg8+!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 23

Magnus Carlsen – Gawain Jones

Sicilian Defence [B76]

Wijk aan Zee (8), 06.02.2018

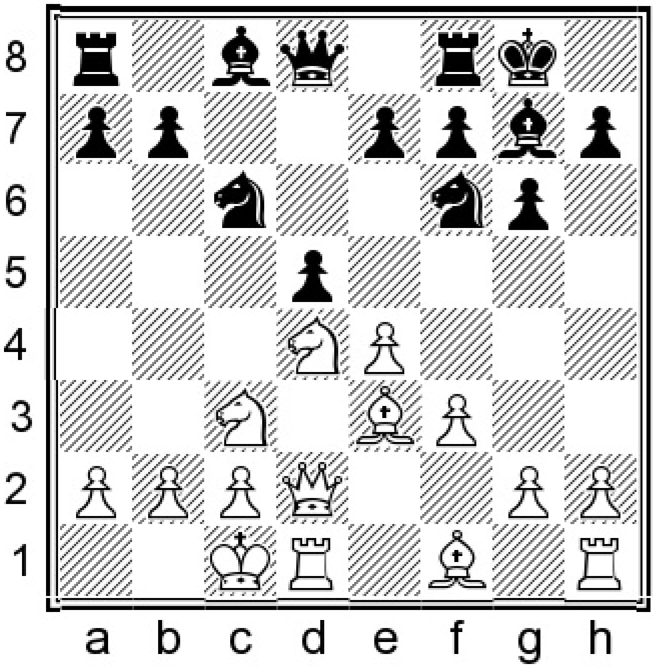
1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6

British GM Gawain Jones is an expert on the Dragon Variation, and this defence was also played by Carlsen several years earlier.

6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3 Nc6 8.Qd2 0-0 9.0-0-0

9.Bc4 is the main alternative, avoiding the game continuation.

9...d5



10.Qe1

Unsurprisingly, Carlsen rejects the more frequently played and more deeply analysed line 10.exd5 Nxd5 11.Nxc6 bxc6 12.Nxd5 cxd5 13.Qxd5 Qc7.

10...e5 11.Nxc6 bxc6 12.exd5 Nxd5

Leko – Carlsen, Miskolc 2008, continued 12...cxd5 13.Bg5 Be6, but after 14.Bc4 White's position is slightly better.

13.Bc4 Be6 14.Kb1

Carlsen doesn't play the more usual 14.Ne4.

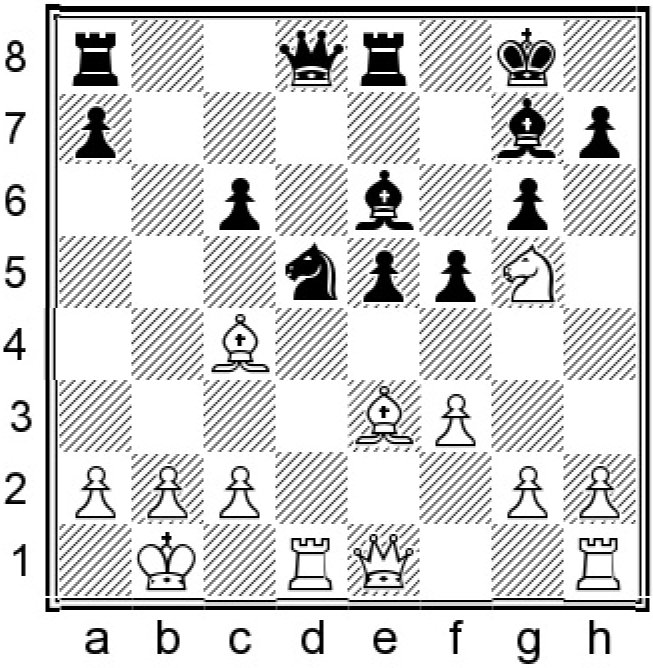
14...Re8

14...Rb8 is the alternative. It was recommended by Jones himself in his book about the Dragon Variation published in 2015.

15.Ne4 f5!

A novelty, better than 15...Qc7 and 15...Qb8 played before.

16.Ng5



16...Bc8!

This is the point of the previous move. It's losing time, but surprisingly White has no way to punish it. Carlsen said he was not very happy at this moment. He hadn't expected the Dragon and he saw that his opponent was better prepared. Maybe this explains, at least partially, what happened next.

17.g4??

This was "a crude blunder after which I was lucky to get any play at all" (Carlsen).

We can imagine that Carlsen, who had spent considerable amounts of time already, only considered the replies 17...fxg4 18.Qb4!, where 18...gxf3? fails to 19.Qb3, and 17...h6 18.Ne4. Both are good for White.

Defending the knight with 17.h4 is the most natural move, but Black's position is quite solid anyway.

17...f4!

It's amazing, but as he admitted after the game, Carlsen didn't see he was losing a piece.

Exercise: Carlsen is objectively lost, but he will of course try to fight till the end. What do you think he played now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.h4

Defending the knight and hoping, someday, to open the h-file.

It was not possible to play 18.Bxf4 exf4 19.Rxd5 due to 19...cxd5! (not 19...Rxe1+? 20.Rd1+!, winning) 20.Bxd5+ Qxd5 21.Qxe8+ Bf8, and Black has an extra piece with no risk.

Question: It must be awful to lose a piece in just one move when you are World Champion. How did Carlsen recover from the shock?

Show/Hide Solution

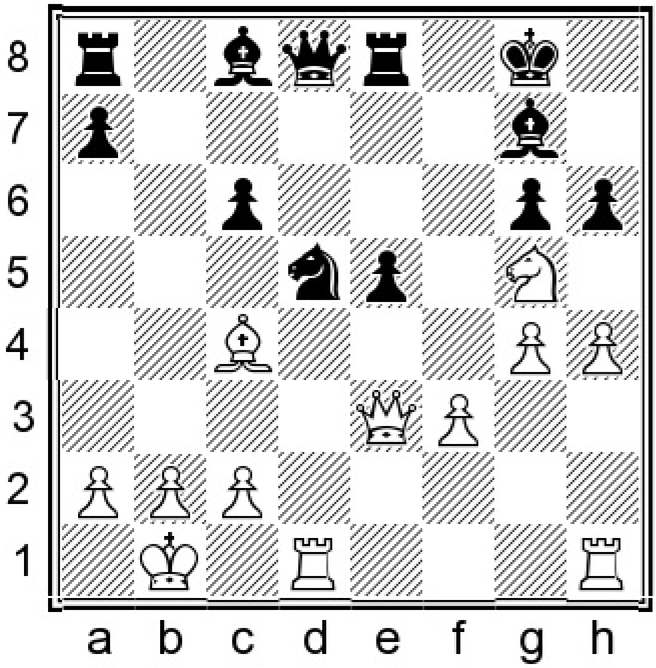
Answer: Normally, this question would be very difficult to answer, but not in this case, as Carlsen himself said after the game that the psychological situation had completely changed. White has lost not only a piece, but also any kind of expectations for the result, while for Jones the reverse must have been true: he had all the pressure on him.

Carlsen also said: "I felt the game was over, but with nothing to lose I adopted the let's play a few moves and see what happens approach."

We must add that the position isn't trivial; White still has chances to complicate the game.

It is easy to imagine Lasker in a similar situation, and maybe even also recovering, as Carlsen does.

18...fxe3 19.Qxe3 h6



Exercise: How did Carlsen try to keep the position complicated?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

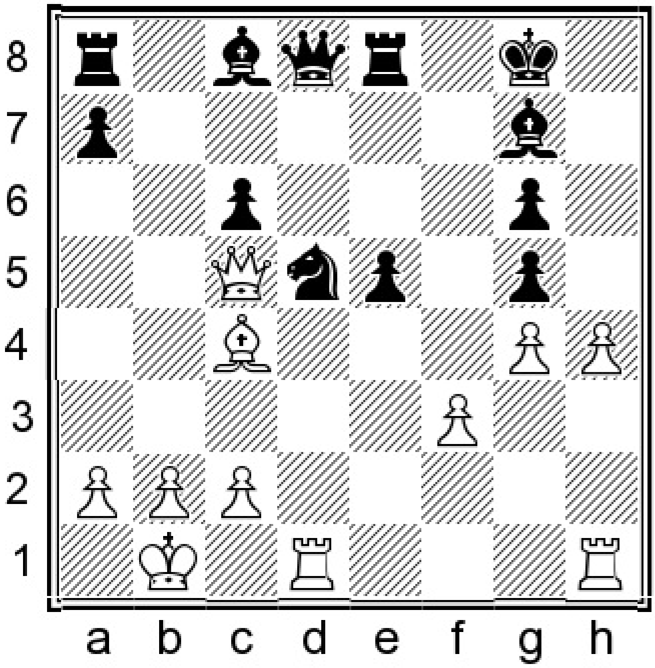
20.Qc5!?

Definitely not 20.Ne4 Be6, and Black has no worries. Carlsen has forced Black to make a choice: Jones must decide between taking the knight and defending c6.

20...Bb7

Black chooses the most solid continuation, developing a piece and defending d5.

This is objectively the best decision, although from the practical point of view maybe 20...hxg5 was preferable.



Let’s see a possible continuation: after 21.Qxc6 Be6 22.Bxd5 Bxd5 23.Rxd5 Qb6 24.Qc4 Qe6! the position has been clarified. With 25.hxg5 White gets three pawns for the piece, but they are not important at this moment. After 25...Rad8, or immediately 25...e4, Black’s advantage is unquestionable and there are fewer opportunities to complicate the game.

21.Ne4 Re6

Black chose one of several good moves at his disposal, maintaining his winning advantage.

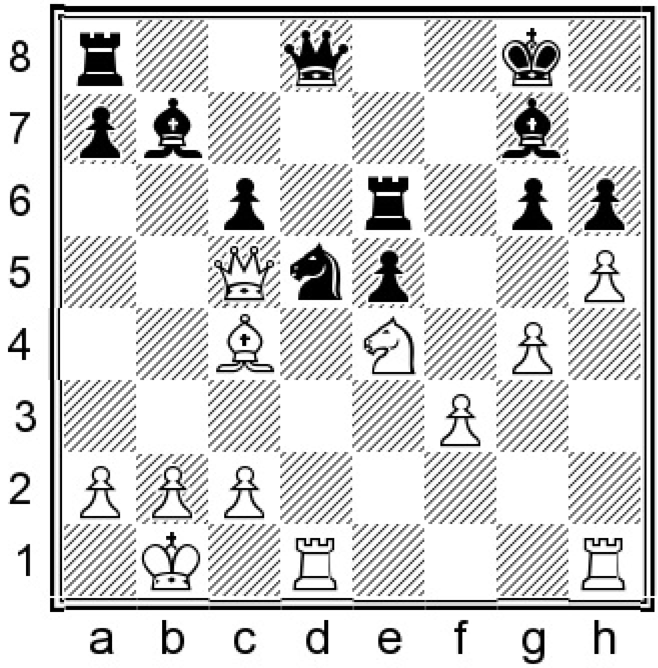
Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22.h5

Carlsen wants to open files, and Black is again given the opportunity to choose between several good moves.



22...Qb6?

In general, exchanging queens is of course desirable for Black. This move doesn’t lose all of his advantage but, due to tactical reasons, it concedes White chances to continue fighting.

In normal conditions, but clearly not in a game as special as this one against the World Champion, in a won position Jones would have seen that the priority was to close the kingside, playing 22...g5!, or 22...Bf8 followed by ...g5. It is true that control of the f5-square would be lost, but White has no effective way to take advantage of it, and it is not a serious defect compared to what happens in the game.

Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen raise the tension?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

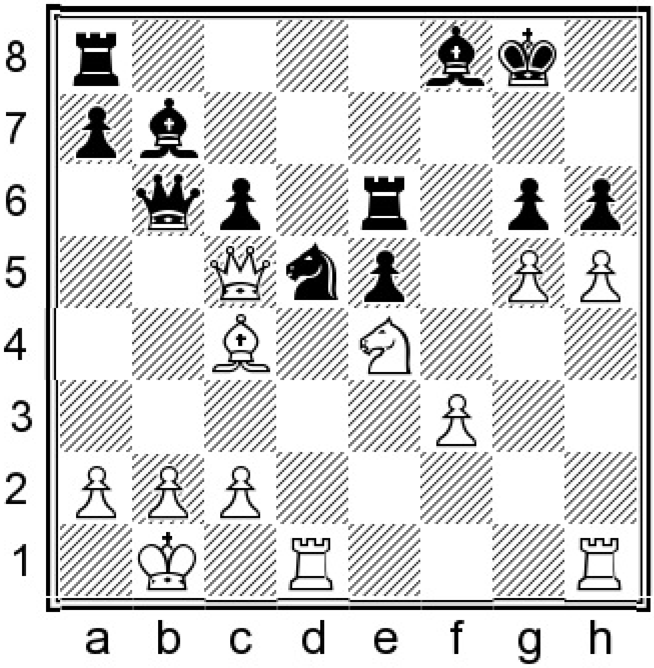
23.g5!

Now Carlsen had “some hope”, as he said after the game. Black was probably expecting the withdrawal of the white queen, and then he would play 23...g5!, but the position is turning chaotic.

23...hxg5?

After this new mistake Black is no longer better.

The immediate exchange of queens 23...Qxc5?, although desired, was bad here, as after 24.Nxc5 Re7 25.Nxb7 Rxb7 White has 26.Rxd5!, winning. However, by playing 23...Bf8! Black would still be on top.



After 24.Qg1! Qxg1 25.Rdxg1 the best move seems to be 25...Be7!, controlling g5 and f6, then White still has some initiative, but the exchange of queens is clearly a step forward for Black.

Exercise: Carlsen is no longer worse after the text move, but how does he demonstrate this?

Show/Hide Solution

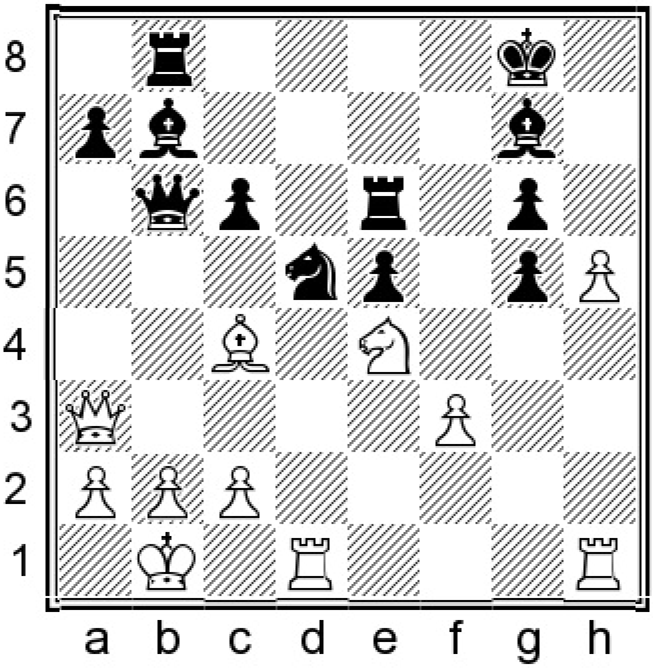
Answer:

24.Qa3!

Keeping the queens on the board after opening up Black’s castled position. But not the materialistic 24.hxg6? Bf8!, or 24...Rb8!

Not objectively, but in practical terms, White is already much better, as his long-term initiative is almost unstoppable.

24...Rb8



Exercise: Carlsen made a surprising move, much praised by his second Nielsen. What was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25.b3!

The alternative was 25.Nxg5 Bf8 26.Qd3 Ba6 27.b3, and White is no worse, but Carlsen prefers, again, to maintain the tension.

Question: This move does not look very impressive, why is it so good?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Let's give the word to Nielsen: "A great move. Sure it blocks White's queen from the third rank, but it can be regrouped via c1 if necessary, and mainly now it's all about king safety: Black's will be exposed, while White, having now eradicated the weakness of b2 and moved the pawn to the safely defended b3, will not have to bother in the slightest about a black counterattack."

The engines evaluate the position as equal, even though Black is a piece up.

Going back to the practical side, it is not necessary to be a professional psychologist to imagine the unpleasant situation Black is now in, after throwing away almost all his advantage.

25...Qd8?

A fruit of the confusion: the queen retreats to defend the kingside, but it will be punished.

In 2018 the engines suggested 25...gxh5, opening the h-file, which was a very difficult move to make. Two years later they prefer 25...Rd8, a move difficult to understand at first sight. Jones said he felt that his move was a mistake, but that it was not easy to see anything good.

At the board with just a few minutes to think, he was absolutely right.

Exercise: How did Carlsen now gain a clear advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Qxa7!

The pawn is less important than activity on the seventh rank. The queen can transfer quickly to the kingside through the g1-a7 diagonal. White plans 27.Nxg5 or 27.Rdg1.

26...gxh5 27.Rxh5 Rg6

Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen gain a decisive advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28.Rxg5!

Sure, opening up the entire kingside, thanks to the undefended b8-rook.

28...Rxg5 29.Nxg5

Now practically all the white moves come with a threat. White plans 30.Ne6 followed by Rg1.

29...Qc8 30.Rg1

White insists on Ne6 again and again.

30...Ra8 31.Qb6 Ra6

Finally driving away the annoying white queen, but...

32.Qc5

Now White threatens Qe7.

32...Qd7 33.Ne4

With the idea of Nf6+. The c4-bishop is more valuable than the rook at this moment.

33...Kh8 34.Qf2

Threatening 35.Qh2+ followed by Nf6+.

34...Qe7 35.Bxa6

Now White has the attack and a material advantage, too.

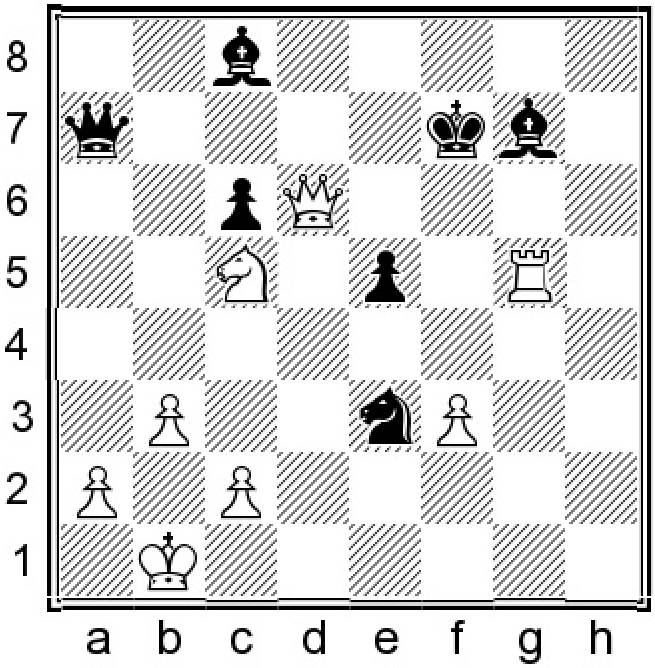
35...Bxa6 36.Qh2+ Kg8 37.Qh6

The queen raids the black camp, preparing the rook's entrance. White threatens 38.Qxc6 winning, while 38.Nd6 must also be countered.

37...Qa7 38.Qe6+ Kf8 39.Rg5

White's attack is unstoppable.

39...Ne3 40.Qd6+ Kf7 41.Nc5 Bc8



Exercise: There are several winning moves. Carlsen chose the simplest. What was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

42.Rxg7+!

After 42...Kxg7 43.Qxe5+ and 44.Qxe3 White is three pawns up.

1–0

Seldom do we see a World Champion making a blunder like the one we saw in this game, losing a piece after the opening (Capablanca against Saemisch, Carlsbad 1929 and Karpov against Christiansen, Wijk aan Zee 1993 come to mind, though both were already dethroned by then).

He was undoubtedly lost, but he didn't just "sit and wait" for his execution. In a Laskerian way, again, he managed to complicate the game, forcing his opponent to take concrete decisions several times.

His opponent had several good options to maintain his advantage, but it was not easy to do at the board.

After two consecutive mistakes, answered with energy and accuracy by Carlsen, chances were already about equal.

Carlsen continued to press his opponent's position and Black made new mistakes, allowing the Word Champion to take advantage of the weakened black king.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Dvoretsky continually emphasized the importance of "prophylactic thinking". It is useful to ask oneself "What can my opponent reply?", a question which you should ask yourself *before* determining your own move. (17.g4? *17.h4! 22...g5!* 23...hxg5?)

2.) Be like Lasker: "Maximum resistance!" "Keep fighting!" Even if you are in a very bad position, you should make your opponent's task as difficult as possible. (20.Qc5! 22.h5! 23.g5!)

3.) The ideal move is one which serves both attack and defence. (25.b3!)

4.) "Long moves" are sometimes difficult to see. (26.Qxa7!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

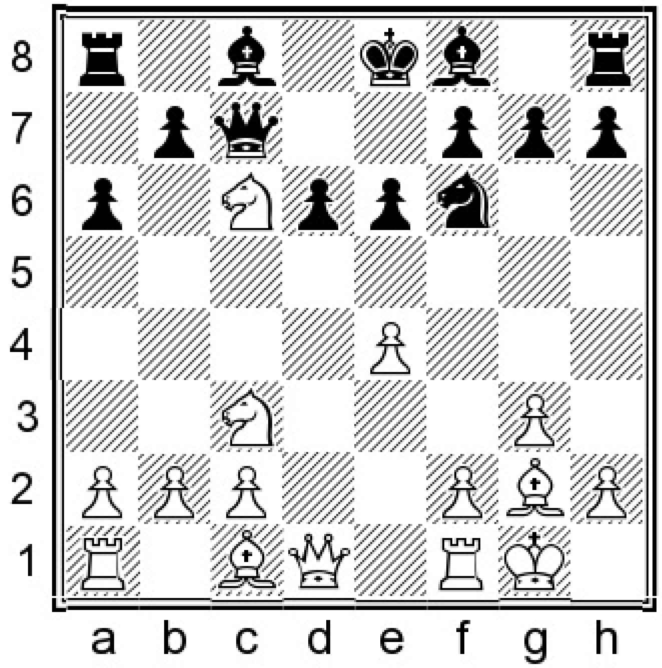
Game 24

Magnus Carlsen – Richard Rapport

Sicilian Defence [B80]

Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee (8), 20.01.2019

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nc6 5.Nc3 Qc7 6.g3 a6 7.Bg2 Nf6 8.0-0 d6 9.Nxc6



Question: Why did Carlsen play this early exchange? It reinforces the black centre. This is normally not so good, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That’s a general rule, yes, valid in many situations, but of course White’s idea doesn’t finish there. He has a plan to confront the new black structure.

9...bxc6

Exercise: Which move is the complement of White’s previous exchange?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10.Na4

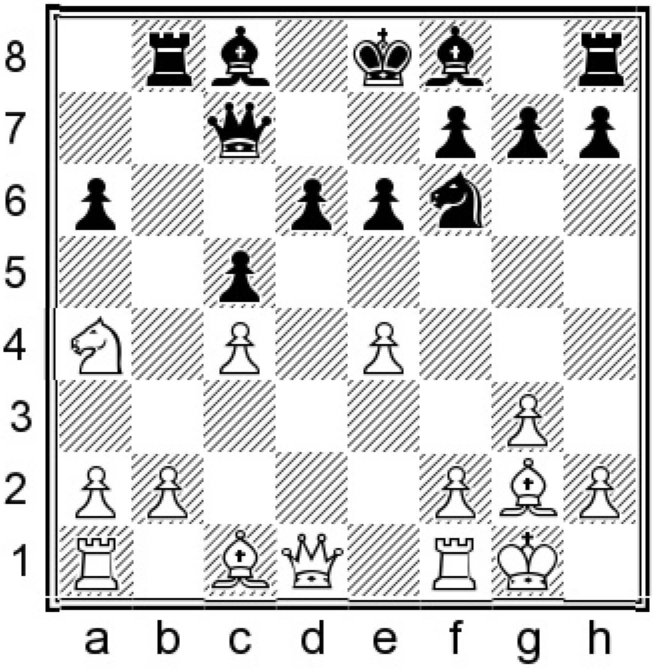
This is the idea, a standard manoeuvre. White will continue with c4, and any advance of the black center must be carefully considered, because it could create serious weaknesses.

10...Rb8

The rook moves off the long diagonal to allow Black to play ...c5 against the coming c4. This allows Black to avoid the pending threat c5, when White can even sacrifice a pawn to damage Black’s structure. Further, the rook occupies a half-open file.

Occupying the b-file is maybe not so useful, however, so the alternative 10...Bb7 must be considered, with the same general idea.

11.c4 c5



Exercise: There are several interesting moves now. What do you think Carlsen chose?

Show/Hide Solution

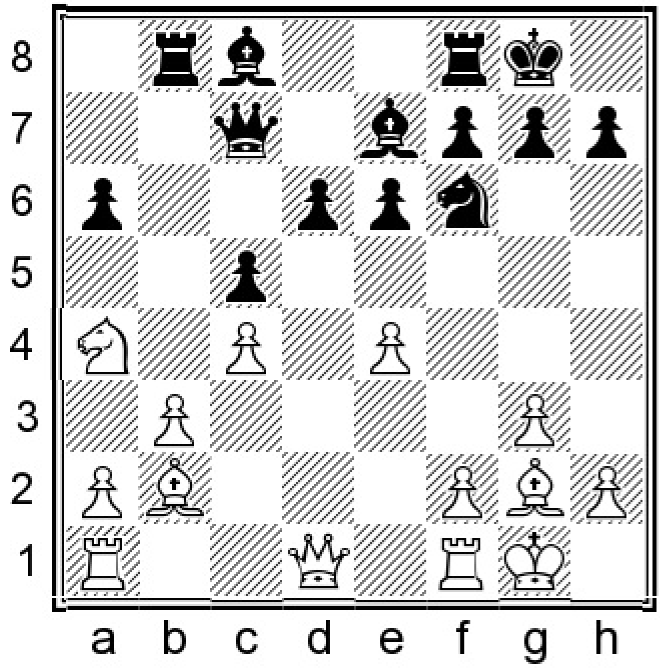
Answer:

12.b3

Carlsen decided to neutralize the rook's pressure and give his c1-bishop a new diagonal.

The alternative was 12.Nc3, considering that once his work was done, the knight moves to a more useful square.

12...Be7 13.Bb2 0-0



14.Qe1

Question: What an odd move! Is it the best? What is the idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: If we look at it without considering the related ideas, it looks strange, yes. But looking more carefully we can see that it has several ideas, and very soon White's position will be well coordinated, as is typical in the games of the World Champion.

The queen has several purposes from e1, as we shall see. In the first place it threatens e5, harming Black's pawn structure: leaving Black with two isolated pawns on a6 and c5.

Another idea behind this move is to play Rd1, occupying the d-file and beginning to press the d6-pawn; there is also a third idea, and we shall see it later.

We see Carlsen's choice has several positive sides, but nonetheless it is not clear that it is better than the natural and good 14.f4.

14...Nd7?!

Question: Dubious? It looks very natural.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is natural, yes, but Black had something better, thanks precisely to the situation of the queen on e1 and the b8-rook, whose influence unexpectedly appears.

The not so natural 14...Bd7! was possible, ignoring the threat 15.e5. There could follow 15...Bxa4 16.exf6 gxf6, and although such a weakness created on Black's kingside would generally be serious, here it is not so troublesome. With the queen on d1 there could follow 17.Qg4+ Kh8 18.Qh4 Qd8 19.Be4, winning, but from e1 the queen is not so quick, and Black's position is not worse.

There would probably follow 15.Nc3 Bc6 16.f4 Nd7, where White can continue manoeuvring or play the thematic Sicilian jump 17.Nd5, but Black's position is fine.

15.Rd1 Bb7

15...Ne5 (threatening 16...Nxc4 17.bxc4 Bd7) leads to a different type of position after 16.Qd2 Nc6 17.f4, and White is slightly better.

Exercise: How did Carlsen's plan continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Qc3

With this finesse trying to play Qd2 "for free", thanks to the mate threat.

16...Bf6

This is the more natural answer, though justifying White's idea.

16...Nf6 was worse, due to 17.e5 of course, and Black's pawn structure is worsened.

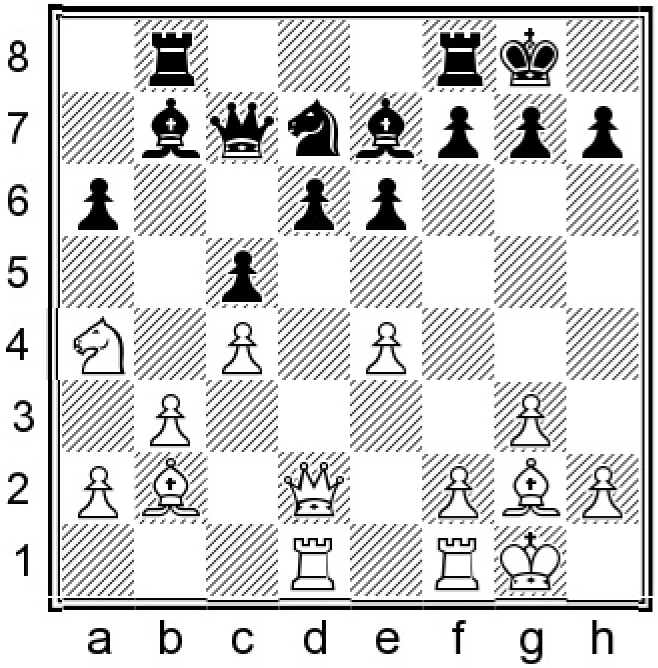
Naturally, Black didn't want to play ...e5 unless there was no other option, because it creates a weakness on d5. However, considering that White will later force it anyway, the immediate 16...e5 should be considered. White would be slightly better after 17.Qd2 followed by Nc3 and f4.

Unfortunately for Black, he does not have the standard manoeuvre ...Nb8-c6 at his disposal.

17.Qd2 Be7

White repeats the position to gain time on his clock.

18.Qc3 Bf6 19.Qd2 Be7



Exercise (simple): How does Carlsen's idea continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.f4

White has an ideal position on the kingside and Black must consider the e5 advance on every move.

20...e5

Question: Was this necessary? Why not play, for example, 20...Rbd8?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because of 21.Bc3!, and we see one of the virtues of delaying Nc3. White gets an ideal arrangement of his forces. The advance e5 gives White an edge after e.g. 21...Qb8 22.Ba5 Rc8 23.e5!.

Exercise: How did Carlsen respond here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.Bc3!

21.Nc3 was also good, but before playing it Carlsen will put his bishop on a5 to create disharmony among the black forces. It is a positive not to allow Black to play ...Rd8 easily. The possibility of playing Bc3 and maybe Ba5 was the third idea which White had in mind when he played 14.Qe1.

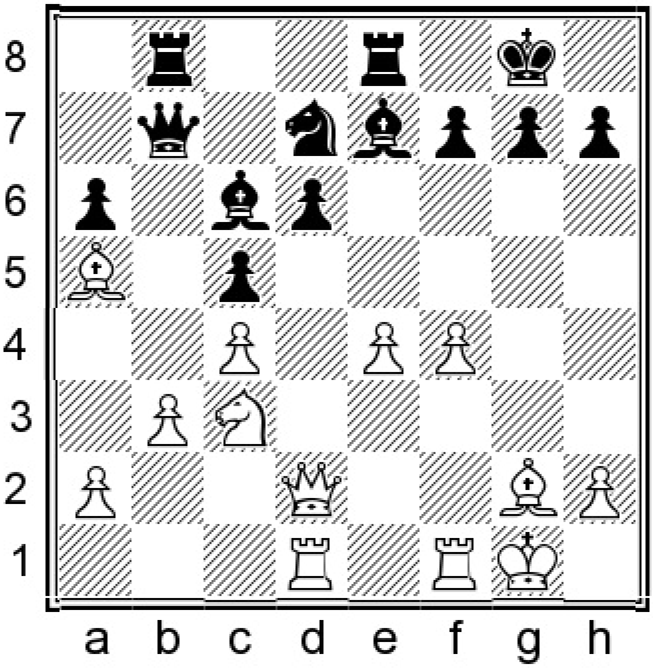
21...Bc6 22.Ba5 Qb7 23.Nc3 exf4

Question: Why does Black play this exchange? Wasn’t 23...Rfe8, for example, more useful?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It’s hard to say, as in that case White could advance 24.f5, followed by g4, h4, etc., without allowing counterplay.

24.gxf4 Rfe8



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25.e5!

This delayed advance is played in ideal conditions. The opened g-file will be a great asset, as we shall see. This is a clear example where intuition turns out to be ahead of initial calculation.

25...Bxg2

Carlsen confessed he had overlooked that after this exchange White was forced to reduce the pressure along the d-file, allowing the e-pawn to be taken.

Nonetheless, while his opponent was thinking Carlsen delved further into the position and saw that his move 25.e5, was still a correct pawn sacrifice. Unsurprisingly, it is the first option of the engines.

26.Qxg2 dxe5

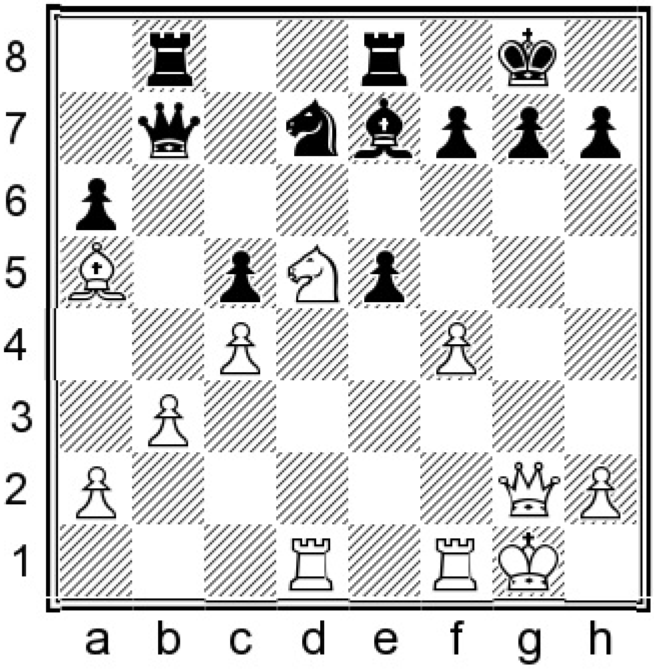
Exercise: How did Carlsen continue after his involuntary pawn sacrifice?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.Nd5

With this strong centralization, the White pieces are very well posted and new tactical possibilities arise.



27...e4

Returning the pawn as an emergency manoeuvre to avoid the opening of the f-file and to prevent some of the new tactical possibilities we mentioned.

Exercise: While his opponent was thinking, Carlsen analysed 27...Bd6. What refutation did he find?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: 28.Nc7! is winning. After 28...Bxc7 29.Qxb7 Rxb7 30.Rxd7 Rc8 31.fxe5 Black is paralysed. There is no good defence against the threat 32.Rfxf7 and Black loses material immediately.

If 27...exf4 or 27...Bf8 then 28.Bc7 and the b8-rook cannot move due to Ne7+ or Nf6+, winning the queen.

Finally, if 27...Kh8 to get away from the checks, there would follow anyway 28.Bc7, and after 28...Rbc8 29.fxe5 the opened f-file gives new life to the attack, e.g. 29...f6 30.Qh3 Nxe5 (if 30...Nf8 then 31.Ba5, to take on f6) 31.Bxe5 fxe5 and now infiltration with 32.Rf7 is crushing.

Exercise: How did White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28.Bc3

The bishop returns to the center of battle, showing Black the drawback to the advance ...e4: the opening of this long diagonal.

This move was much stronger than hurrying to recover the pawn with 28.Qxe4, as then 28...Nf6 follows, relieving the pressure.

28...f6

Defending g7 and closing the dangerous diagonal. If 28...Bf8 then 29.f5 may follow (threatening 30.Bxg7! Bxg7 31.f6 Nxf6 32.Nxf6+, winning material), and after 29...Kh8 White can play 30.f6 g6 31.Ne7!, followed by 32.Qh3 or 32.Rd5 and Rfd1, with an irresistible initiative.

Exercise: Now White has several good moves. Which do you think Carlsen chose?

Show/Hide Solution

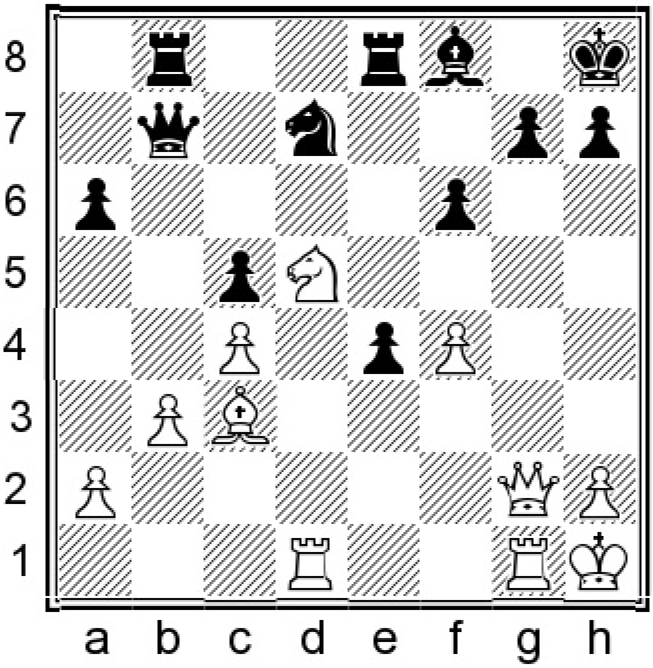
Answer:

29.Kh1!

Taking advantage of the g-file, which we discussed on move 25.

This is much more "human", and more unpleasant for his opponent in practice, than the also strong 29.Rfe1! or 29.Rde1!, which the engines prefer. Those moves recover the pawn in much better conditions than on move 28.

29...Kh8 30.Rg1 Bf8



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31.Ne3!

"An elegant move, keeping the attacking process fluent and preventing Black from clearing the e-file for his rook with ...e3." (Judit Polgar).

Carlsen again rejects recovering his pawn, which could have been done by playing 31.Nxf6 Nxf6 32.Bxf6 (and equally rejected 31.Bxf6): he wants more.

31...Qc6

The queen heads to the weakened kingside.

Exercise (simple): The same move and the same manoeuvre would follow after 31...Rbd8. What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32.Rd5!

This was one of the ideas of 31.Ne3!, to use d5 as a springboard for the rook to head to the h-file, joining the kingside attack.

32...Qe6 33.Rh5 Qf7

Exercise: There is more than one attractive move. Which would you choose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34.Qh3

The more "human" move again and the more direct, too. It threatens to take on h7. The strong alternative, preferred by the engines, is to withdraw the rook to h4 or h3, and then treble on the g-file, but I think very few masters would consider this when having a strong "human" idea available.

34...g6

If 34...h6 then 35.Nf5 would naturally follow, looking at g7 and/or h6, with unstoppable threats. The immediate threat is 36.Nxh6 gxh6 37.Rxh6+ Bxh6 38.Qxh6+ Qh7 39.Bxf6+ and mate. After 35...Rb7 the combination 36.Rxg7 Bxg7 37.Nxh6 is already possible and the complications lead to a white win, but 36.Rh4 followed by Rhg4 is simpler, when Black cannot withstand the pressure of the five white pieces attacking. If 35...Kh7 then the same manoeuvre 36.Rh4 plus 37.Rhg4 is winning, as well as the more direct 36.Rxg7+ Bxg7 37.Nxh6 Qxh5 38.Qxh5 Bxh6 39.Qf5+ Kg8 40.Qxd7. 37...Qg6, instead of 37...Qxh5 is not enough either, as there would follow 38.f5 Qxh6 39.Rxh6+ Bxh6 40.Qh5! Rg8 41.Bd2.

35.Rh4 Rb6

If 35...Kg8 then 36.Rxg6+ Qxg6 37.Rg4 is good enough. e.g. 37...Re7 38.Rxg6+ hxg6 39.Nd5 Rf7 40.Qe6, winning.

Exercise: What should he play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

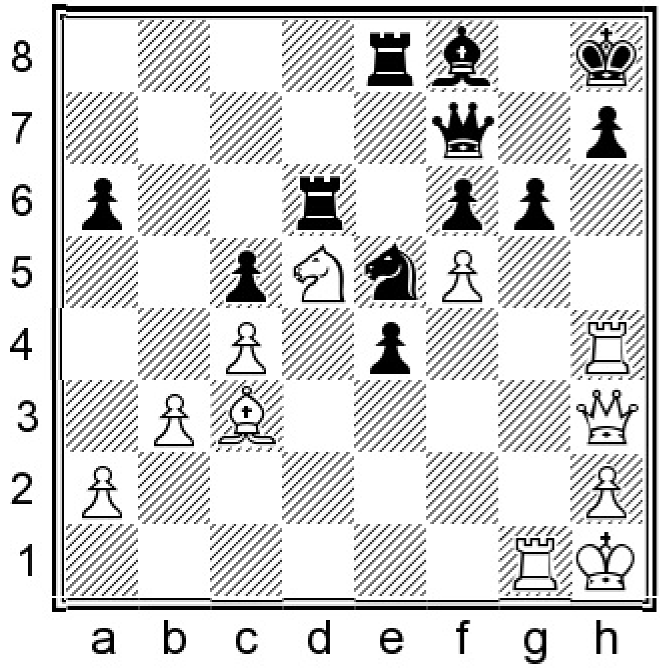
36.f5

Sure, taking advantage of the possibility to open files accorded by 34...g6.

The move order 36.Nd5 Rd6 37.f5 was also good. It provided less options but there are no big differences.

36...Ne5 37.Nd5 Rd6

The move order played allowed the resource 37...g5, but Black is also much worse after 38.Rxe4 Rd6 39.Bxe5 Rxe5 (or 39...fxe5 40.Rxg5) 40.Rxe5 fxe5 41.f6 or 41.Rxg5.



Exercise: White has a winning combination. How does it start?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38.fxg6!

The quickest way, opening files. The a1-h8 long diagonal will play a decisive role.

38...Nxg6

Exercise: How does White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39.Bxf6+!

39.Nxf6!, with the same idea, also works, as we shall see.

39...Rxf6

Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

40.Rxh7+!

White gets a decisive material advantage after 40...Qxh7 41.Qxh7+ Kxh7 42.Nxf6+ and Nxe8. In case of 39.Nxf6 Rxf6 40.Rxh7+ Qxh7 then the continuation would have been 41.Bxf6+ Kg8 42.Qf5, or 41...Bg7 42.Bxg7+ Kxg7 43.Qd7+.

1–0

This was the curious recap Carlsen made immediately after the game: “I don’t think it was a masterpiece by any stretch. I think I had a very nice position early on and then it kind of played itself. And I missed a number of things. But it’s good to get a win.”

Actually, it was a model game from his side, but he was probably still annoyed at his “mistake” (as he later admitted) when he sacrificed a pawn involuntarily. The sacrifice was objectively very strong, and after gradually improving the position of his pieces, clearing squares for each other, it led to a convincing mating attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) “Mistrust natural-looking moves” (Reti). (14...Nd7? *14...*B*d7!*)

2.) Don’t miss any “free” improvement of your pieces. (16.Qc3! 17.Qd2! 21.Bc3!)

3.) It is impossible not to commit mistakes when we have a very good position, yet even miscalculations may turn out to be excellent moves. (25.e5!)

4.) Generally, powerful activation of the pieces is more profitable than gaining a minimal material advantage. (29.Kh1! *28.*Q*xe4?* 31.Ne3! *31.*N*xf6? 31.*B*xf6?*)

5.) Pay attention to the way Carlsen improves the position of all his pieces. (21.Bc3! 29.Kh1! 30.Rg1! 31.Ne3! 32.Rd5! 33.Rh5!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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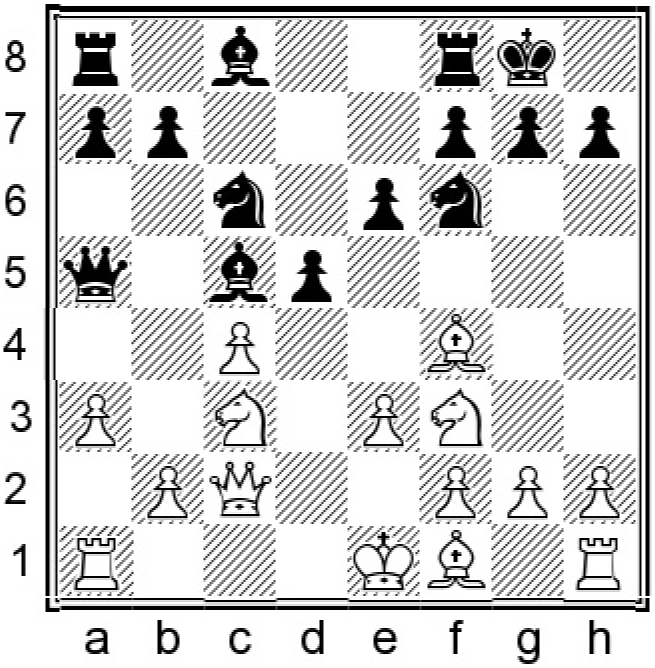
Game 25

Magnus Carlsen – Viswanathan Anand

Queen’s Gambit [D37]

Gashimov Memorial, Shamkir (2), 01.04.2019

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 d5 4.Nc3 Be7 5.Bf4 0-0 6.e3 c5 7.dxc5 Bxc5 8.Qc2 Nc6 9.a3 Qa5



10.Rd1

This line became popular after the match Karpov – Korchnoi, Baguio 1978. Later, the sharper 10.0-0-0 appeared, where the position of the kings on opposites flanks may lead to an intense battle in which tactics are key.

The text move is less violent. White delays his development, preferring to press the d5-pawn first; the plan is to continue with Be2 and castle, leaving Black with one dilemma: how to solve the passivity of his c8-bishop.

We must not forget that after his king reaches a safe place White will threaten b4. However, 11.b4? now fails to 11...Nxb4 12.axb4 Bxb4 13.Rc1 Ne4.

10...Rd8

Caruana surprised Carlsen with this move in the 2018 World Championship match, and there have been a few important games with 10...Rd8. Black defends the d5-pawn and make a future ...Ne4 available.

10...Re8 was more usual, preparing the break ...e5, creating X-ray pressure between the black rook and the white king, and adding tactical chances such as the jump ...Nd4.

A third possibility is 10...Be7, where Carlsen has played both sides.

After 11.Be2 dxc4 12.Bxc4 Nh5 13.0-0 Nxf4 14.exf4 g6 15.g3 Rd8! Black was fine in Kramnik – Carlsen, Dortmund 2009, although White finally won.

In Carlsen – Nakamura, Saint Louis 2015, after 11.Be2 Ne4 12.cxd5 Nxc3 13.Qxc3 Qxc3+ 14.bxc3 exd5 15.Rxd5 Bxa3 16.Nd4 White took the initiative, pressing the black position throughout the game, although it was a draw after 95 moves.

11.Be2

The main alternative is 11.Nd2, getting rid of the pin on the c3-knight and planning Nb3 to expel the black queen from her annoying location.

An important line after that is 11...d4, trying to take advantage of White’s lack of development. One of the latest examples is 12.Nb3 Qb6 13.Na4 Bb4+ 14.axb4 Qxb4+ 15.Nd2, Aronian – Caruana, London 2018 (the game ended in a draw), and Karjakin – Anand, in the sixth round of the same tournament of our main game, Shamkir 2019 (this ended in a win for White, but not due to the opening).

11...Ne4

This was the idea.

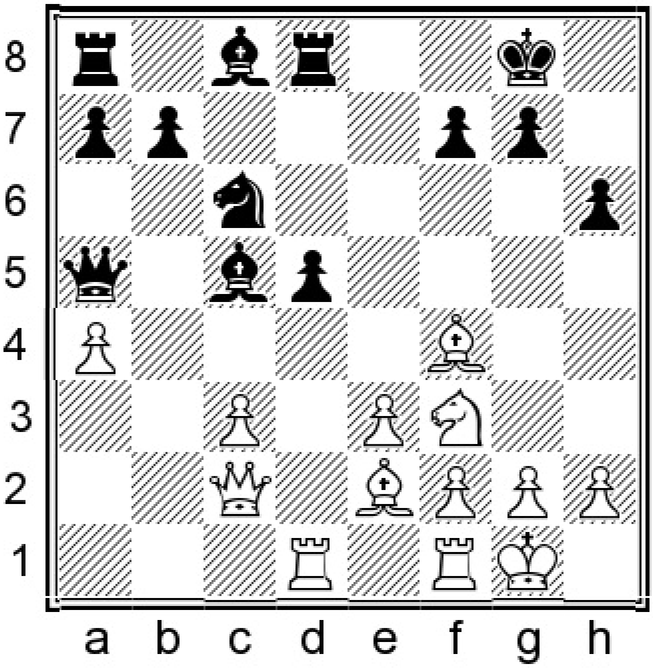
12.cxd5

Varying versus Carlsen – Caruana, London m/2 2018. There followed 12.0-0 Nxc3 13.bxc3 h6, and Black solved his opening problems. It was a draw in 49 moves. Mamedyarov – Karjakin from the last round of Shamkir 2019 also ended in a draw.

12...Nxc3 13.bxc3 exd5 14.0-0 h6

The black kingside is rather unprotected. This is not a big problem, however, because White has no attack. Moreover, this is a good prophylactic move, denying Ng5, before deciding how to complete development.

15.a4



15...Bd6

Question: This is the better bishop, isn’t it? Why then exchange it instead of developing the other bishop?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Well, this bishop is not voluntarily exchanged by Black. The problem with the white f4 “bad bishop” is that it isn’t bad at all. His pressure on the queenside is strong, and if Black plays a developing move like 15...Be6? then 16.Rb1! is strong. After the exchange of bishops Black can complete his development without trouble and equalize the game.

16.Bxd6 Rxd6

Question: But Black has an isolated d-pawn, is the position really equal?

Show/Hide Solution

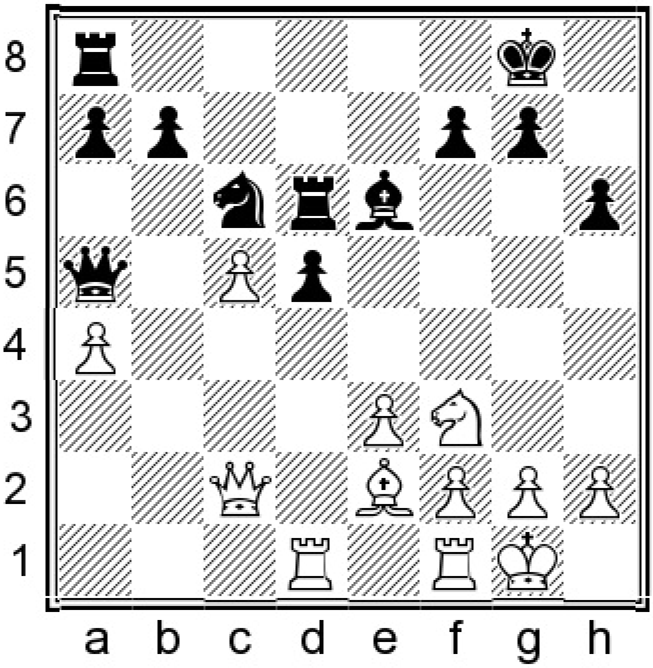
Answer: Maybe not completely, but any advantage is more apparent than real. The pawn is easily defended and White has no way to create a second weakness or to create serious problems. Don’t forget that White has two isolated pawns, too.

Nonetheless, an equal position doesn’t eliminate fighting chances, which Lasker used to take and Carlsen does now.

17.c4

Thanks to the pinned black rook White converts his weak c3-pawn into a strong advanced point on c5. This helps to press the b7-pawn and it controls much more important squares than from c3.

17...Be6 18.c5



Question: I see the pawn arrives on c5, but is this enough to guarantee at least a slight advantage?

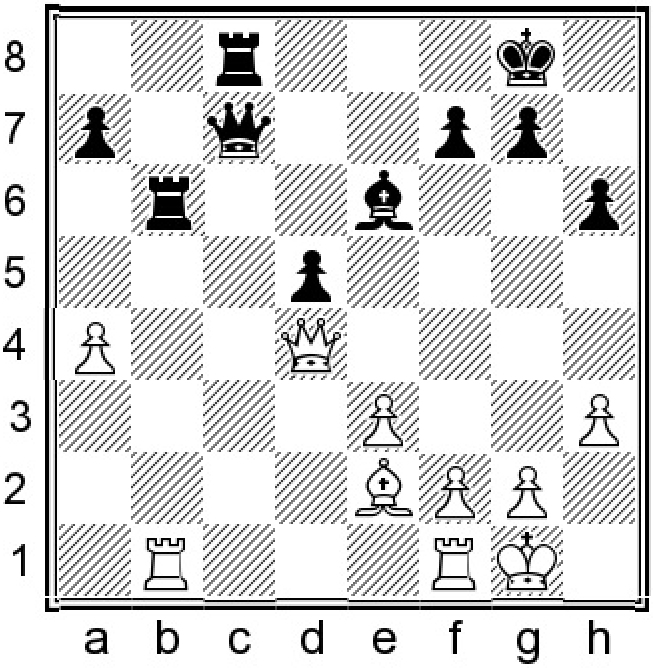
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: No, not really, but chess is a fighting game. In an equal position White tries to improve step by step, or continues manoeuvring to keep the position alive if necessary.

This approach to playing the game was followed not only by Lasker and Carlsen; a few names that immediately come to mind are Petrosian and, especially, Karpov. Fischer referred to “the cat and mouse game” played by Petrosian, where “the cat” Petrosian was frequently victorious.

Moreover, Jan Timman highlighted Karpov’s ability, in his prime (over more than 20 years) to maintain the tension in slightly worse positions where he was still playing for a win.

18...Rdd8 19.Rb1 Qc7 20.Qb2 Rab8 21.Nd4 Nxd4 22.Qxd4 b6 23.cxb6 Rxb6 24.h3 Rc8



25.Rfd1

In his previous analysis Carlsen thought he could continue 25.Rbc1, considering that his queen would be better than the two rooks (in addition to the weakness of the a7-pawn). By the way, I have noticed in other games that Carlsen likes the queen against two rooks slightly more often than other great players. However, here he didn't choose it because he saw that Black could get enough play after e.g. 25...Qxc1 26.Rxc1 Rxc1+ 27.Kh2 Rc2 28.a5 Rbb2, then after 29.Bf3 Rxf2 30.Kg3 a6 the black king is safe and there is no advantage for White.

Question: But what he played seems no better. Black appears to be safe, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Right, the position is equal, and the most logical outcome would be a draw, but at the board it is not a simple mathematical calculation: "the mistakes are there, waiting to be made" (Tartakower).

25...Qc3?

Anand commits the first of what he considered three blunders. Instead of 25...Qc5! "a fairly simple draw."

Carlsen agreed with the assessment: "25...Qc3 is really bad. It goes from being a pretty much equal position to one where I can press and he has to defend accurately."

26.Qxc3 Rxc3

Exercise: Why was 25...Qc3 inaccurate?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.a5

Here is why, whereas after 25...Qc5 this advance was not possible.

Objectively, Black’s position is not yet bad, but from a practical point of view it is. No chess players, even strong ones, are free from repeated thoughts in these circumstances such as “Why on Earth did I play 25...Qc3?” This slight discomfort can grow into a lack of concentration and new mistakes.

27...Rxb1 28.Rxb1 Rc5?!

“A second blunder,” according to Anand, who added, “it may not lose, but 28...Ra3 is still a fairly comfortable hold, and after 29.a6 g6 30.Rb7 Ra1+ 31.Kh2 Ra2, chasing the bishop, it is a draw.”

Maybe there is a simpler way, 28...g5, getting a luft, with the same idea. 29.a6 doesn’t get anything after 29...Bc8 30.Rb8 Kg7. In the case of 29.Rb7 Rc1+ 30.Kh2 Rc2 31.Bb5 Rxf2 (threatening 32...d4) 32.Kg3 Rb2 (intending 33...d4) 33.a6 Bc8 (33...Rb3 is also good) 34.Rb8 Kg7 35.Rxc8 Rxb5 36.Rc7 Rb3 37.Kf2 Rb2+, followed by ...Rb3 again, Black has enough for a draw.

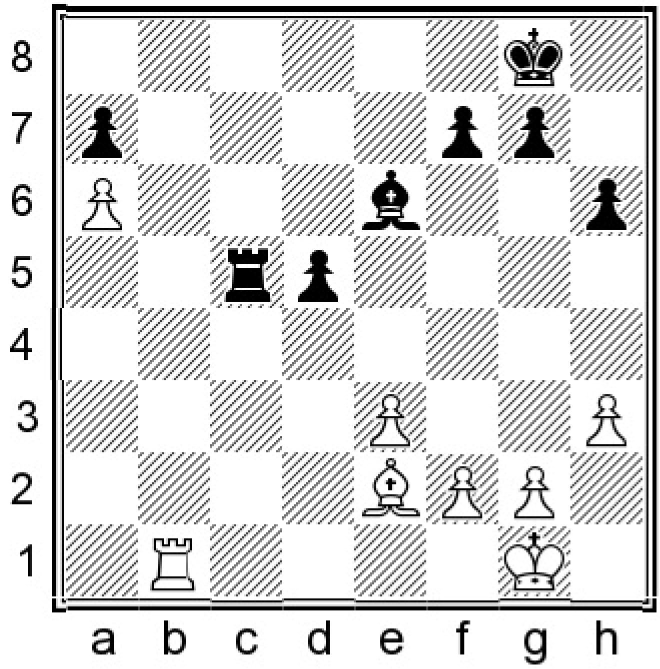
Exercise: How did Carlsen create problems for Black?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.a6

White has finally created a concrete threat, to play 30.Rb7, but 29.Rb8+! Kh7 (or 29...Rc8 30.Rb7) 30.a6 was stronger, and it doesn’t allow the third missed defence.



29...g6?

The last and clearest blunder of the game. 29...Bc8! was no bed of roses, but had to be tried. (This defence was impossible after 29.Rb8+, if 29...Bc8 then 30.Ba6.)

Anand pointed out that after 29...Bc8 30.Rb8 he initially thought he could draw playing simply 30...Kh7, getting rid of the pin, but he saw too late that after 31.Rb7 the resource 31...Bxb7 32.axb7 Rc1+ 33.Kh2 Rb1 loses to 34.Bd3+.

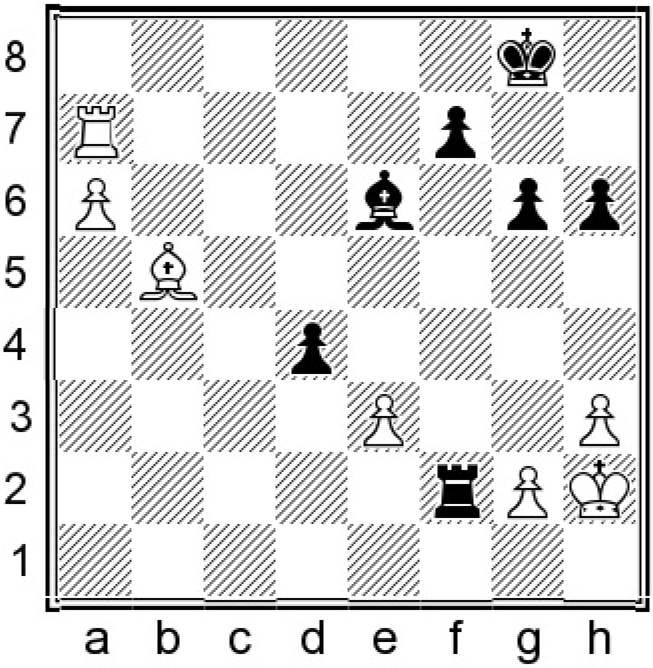
Exercise: The defence may be improved. How?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Anand said that after 30.Rb8 he could reply 30...g6!. If 31.Bg4 then 31...f5 is enough for defence. Black will unpin the bishop next and the position is tenable.

30.Rb7 Rc1+ 31.Kh2 Rc2 32.Bb5 Rb2

At first Anand believed he could play 32...Rxf2, and after 33.Rxa7 look for counterplay against g2 by playing 33...d4.



Exercise: What is wrong with this?

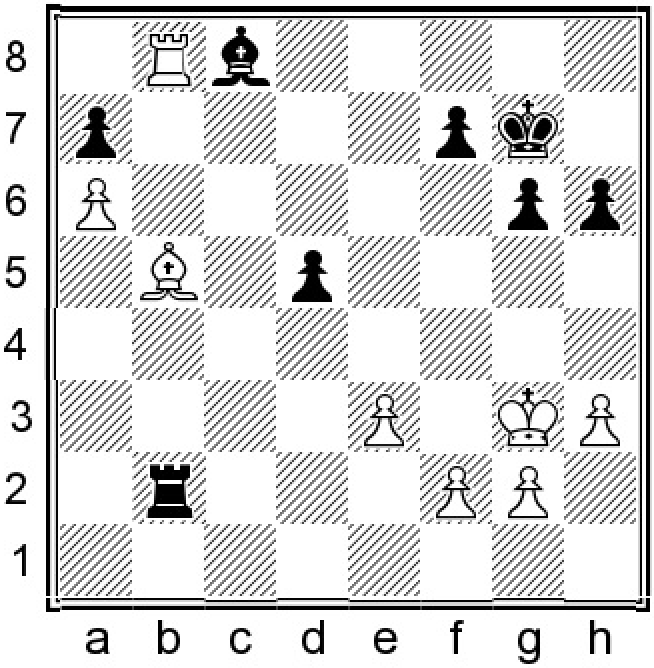
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Anand didn't see how to continue after 34.e4, because his bishop ends up dominated. Carlsen added a new reason: 34.Ra8+ Kg7 35.Rd8.

33.Kg3!

Defending f2 and threatening to withdraw the bishop, playing for example 34.Bd7, and the a7-pawn falls.

33...Bc8 34.Rb8 Kg7



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

35.Rxc8

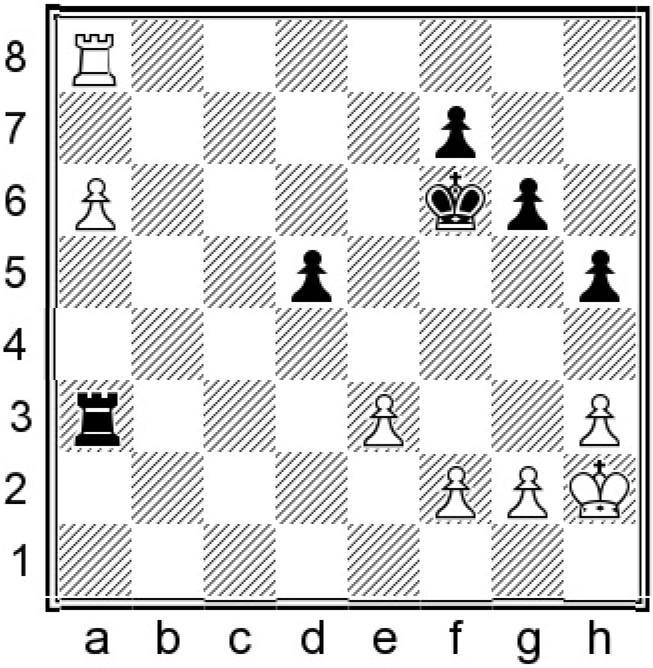
Sure, this example doesn't belong to the category "All rook endings are drawn". The a7-pawn will soon be captured.

Question: But an extra a-pawn often isn't enough to win. Why is this case different?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because there is a second weakness in Black's position, as we shall see.

35...Rxb5 36.Rc7 Ra5 37.Rxa7 Kf6 38.Ra8 Ra3 39.Kh2 h5



Exercise: How did Carlsen proceed?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

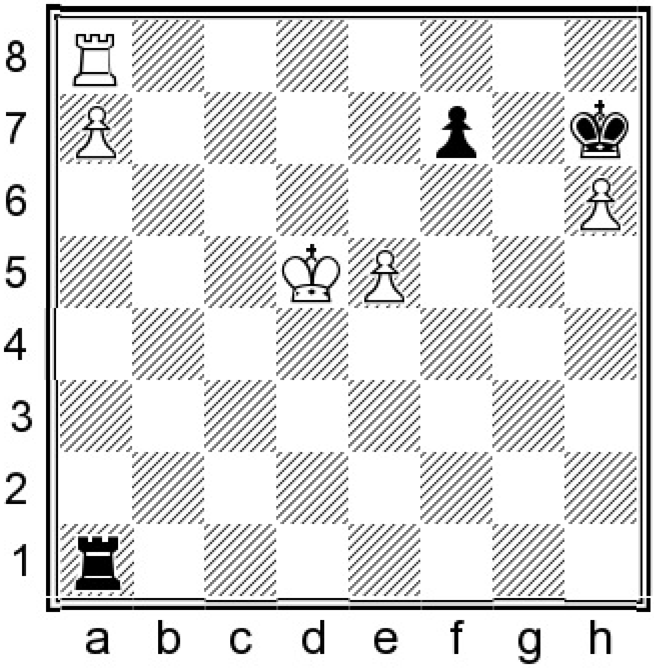
40.a7!

Generally, this advance is not good. It frequently leads to a draw, because White loses the a7 square where he wants to hide the king after he arrives on b6, to protect the a-pawn and untie the rook. In the present case, though, it wins because the black d-pawn falls.

40...Ra2

Carlsen later showed that Black could play 40...h4 41.g4 hxg3+ 42.fxg3! (not 42.Kxg3 d4), and that White would have played the same plan that would have happened in the game had Black not resigned when he did (see below). Black's move order is not important, as Black can only wait. His rook is tied to the a-file, and his king cannot allow a check (without losing it, of course), because White's a-pawn would queen.

Here is an example: 42...Kg7 43.Kg2 Kf6 44.Kf2 Kg7 45.Ke2 Kf6 46.Kd2 Kg7 47.Kc2 Kf6 48.Kb2 Ra5 49.Kc3 Kg7 50.Kb4 Ra1 51.Kc5 (and the d5-pawn drops, as 51...Ra5+ loses to 52.Kb6) 51...Ra2 52.Kxd5 Ra3. Now White optimises the position of his pawns: 53.e4 Ra1 54.h4 Ra2 55.g4 Ra3 56.e5 Ra2 57.h5 gxh5 58.gxh5 Ra1 59.h6+ Kh7



60.Ke4 (a different way is 60.Kd6 Ra5 61.Kd7, and Black is in zugzwang: the f7-pawn cannot be defended after 62.Ke7, if 61...Rd5+ then 62.Kc6 Ra5 63.Kb6, winning) 60...Ra3 61.Kf5 (threatening 62.Kf6) 61...Ra6 62.Kg5 Rg6+ 63.Kf4 Ra6 64.Kf5 and Black is in zugzwang again. He cannot prevent the winning 65.Kf6.

41.h4 Kf5 42.f3 Ra1 43.g3

And Anand gave up. The game would finish in a similar ending to the one that Carlsen showed, for example: 43...Ra2+ 44.Kg1 Kf6 45.Kf1 Kf5 46.Ke1 Kf6 47.Kd1 Kf5 48.Kc1 Kf6 49.Kb1 Ra6 50.Kb2 Kf5 51.Kc3 Ra4 52.Kb3 Ra6 53.Kb4 Ra1 54.Kc5 Kf6 55.Kxd5, followed by 56.g4, planning to take on h5 and then create a free pawn on the e-file by playing e4, f4, e5, f5, and e6. If Black plays 56....hxg4, then after 57.fxg4 we get the same structure that Carlsen analysed.

1–0

Carlsen didn’t get any advantage out of the opening, but we again saw the traits of Lasker in this game, without the champion resorting to great complications this time.

The position was equal, and two things were required to change the balance. Firstly, his opponent relaxed somewhat. Secondly, Black made more than one mistake, ones that White aimed to force by continually pressing his opponent’s position.

So this is what happened. Black’s moves 25 and 28 were poor, and after that White had the advantage and some chances of victory. Carlsen was able to convert them into a win.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) “The principle of the second weakness” is an important one to bear in mind. One side might be able to defend a single weakness successfully, for example an isolated pawn, but he will generally have difficulties if a second front is opened up.

2.) Tarrasch clarified that “It isn’t what’s removed from the board that matters, but what remains.”

(15...Bd6!)

3.) Mistakes are unavoidable. (25...Qc3? *25...Qc5!* 28...Rc5? *28...g5!* 29...g6? *29...Bc8!*)

4.) Lasker showed that there are always chances of defence in bad positions, and chances to try to win in equal positions as well. (29.a6! 33.Kg3!)

5.) “Study the endgame!” (40.a7!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

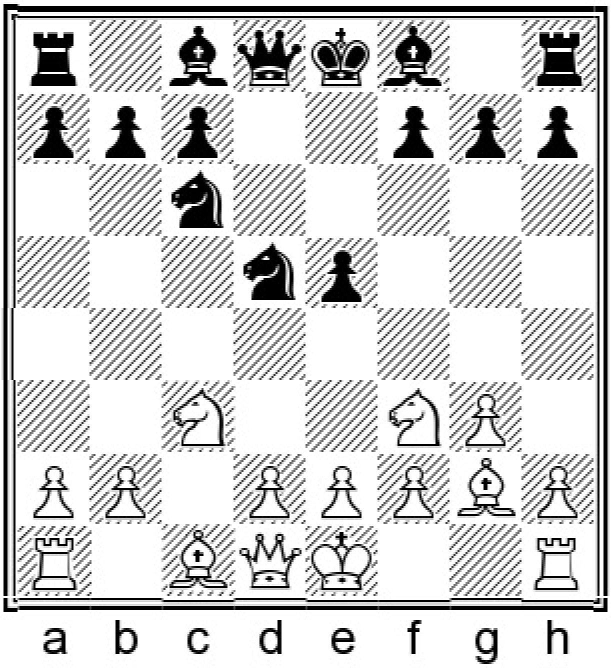
Game 26

Magnus Carlsen – Anish Giri

English Opening [A29]

Shamkir (7), 07.04.2019

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 Nc6 4.g3 d5 5.cxd5 Nxd5 6.Bg2



6...Nb6 had been considered almost forced here, avoiding the threat 7.Nxe5 and preventing the advance d4, which is typical with reversed colours in the accelerated Dragon Variation of the Sicilian Defence.

6...Bc5

This is the “recent” discovery. It gained much popularity once it was established that 7.Nxe5 is not advantageous for White. Black keeps the knight centralised and develops his bishop to a more active place than the usual e7.

7.0-0

Question: So why is 7.Nxe5 not so dangerous?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: After 7.Nxe5 Black gets enough compensation for the pawn. There may follow 7...Nxc3 8.Bxc6+ bxc6 9.bxc3 Qd5 10.Nf3 Bh3. White's king has no safe place, and the light squares are weak, which is enough for the pawn.

If 9.dxc3 Qxd1+ (9...Qe7 is also interesting) 10.Kxd1 Bxf2 11.Rf1 Bc5 12.Rxf7 (not 12.Nxf7?? 0-0, winning) and the position is equal after an almost forced line, 12...Bd6 13.Rf3! Bxe5 14.Re3 0-0 15.Rxe5 Rf1+ 16.Kd2 Bh3!.

There are more possibilities, of course, but no clear way for White to gain an advantage.

7...0-0 8.d3 h6

Question: Is this move necessary?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: No, the main alternative is 8...Re8, which seems more useful at first sight. Carlsen – Caruana, London 2018 m/4 continued 9.Bd2, but in the ninth game Carlsen chose 9.Bg5.

The move 9.Ng5 was also played, by Caruana himself, after knowing these antecedents. The modest move played by Giri is understandable.

Further, 8...Bb6 was played in Eljanov – Grischuk, Geneva 2017. That game greatly contributed to the popularisation of the line in top-level practice.

9.Nxd5

White exchanges on d5 before Black plays 9...Be6. The black queen will be uncomfortable due to the X-ray between the g2-bishop and the queen.

9...Qxd5 10.a3 a5 11.Bd2 Qe6 12.Rc1

White wins a new tempo and develops all his pieces.

12...Qe7

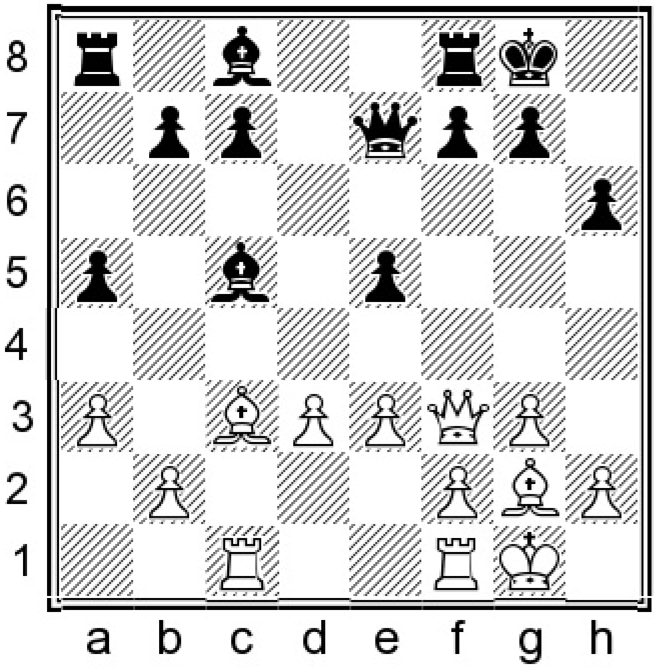
Black, for his part, defends the bishop, preparing the development of his c8-bishop.

13.Bc3 Nd4

This is a typical manoeuvre, to be able to play ...c6, closing the long diagonal to neutralize the g2-

bishop.

14.e3 Nxf3+ 15.Qxf3



Question: It appears that White doesn't get anything special once ...c6 is played. Black has no clear reason to be afraid, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are probably right. Carlsen commented after the game: "Usually when there are no knights on the board it's very dry and there's nothing for White," and Giri said "That's what I also thought," although Carlsen added, "but in this case I feel like I'm getting some quick play and at least practically it feels easier to play."

15...Bd6

Question: Why not first play 15...c6 and only then decide what to do with the other pieces? That is more flexible, isn't it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That was a good alternative; what Black played avoids White's plan to play d4. After for example 15...c6 16.Qh5 Re8 White may continue 17.d4 Bd6 (opening the e-file favours White). It is true that White doesn't get anything tangible after dxe5 or d5. But what Black chose in the game isn't bad either.

Exercise: We know the position is about equal. Which plan did Carlsen play trying to fight for the advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Qh5!

The first step of an amazing plan. Black has several choices that seem satisfactory.

16...c6

This was Black's idea. It is fine and Black's position is good.

16...f5 seemed a reasonable alternative, too, but after 17.f4 exf4 18.exf4 c6 19.Rfe1 (19.Qg6 Rd8, planning 20...Qf7, gives White nothing) 19...Qf7 20.Qe2 Bd7 21.Qf2 Giri thought his pieces were slightly uncoordinated, while the a5-pawn is weak, too.

Exercise: What was Carlsen's idea'?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.f4!

The second step.

17...exf4

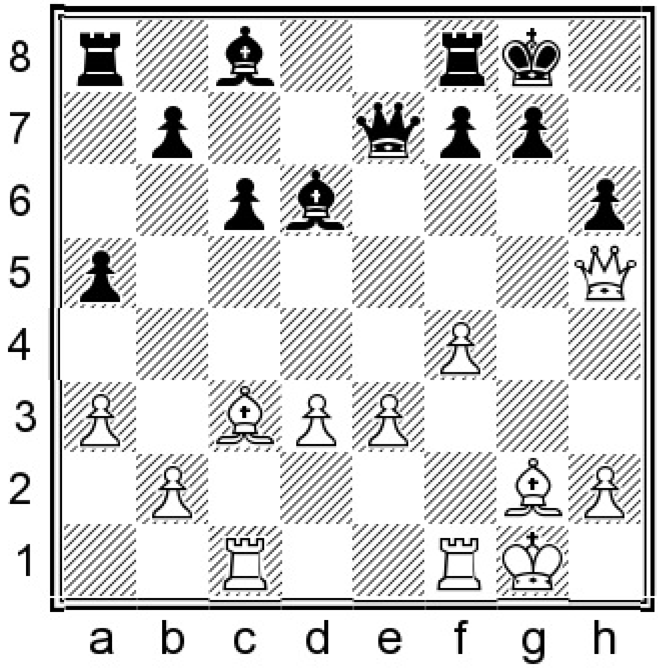
A logical move, but after what happened we can say that 17...f5 was safer. White gets nothing after 18.fxe5 Bxe5 19.d4 Bf6 20.Rce1, and here 20...Be6 is good enough according to Giri, while Carlsen suggested 20...Qd6. Instead, after 17...f5 Carlsen would have played 18.Kh1 followed by Rce1 (or in the reverse order), preparing the advance e4.

Exercise: What recapture was played by Carlsen?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.gxf4!



An unexpected pawn sacrifice which took Black unawares and had a lethal practical effect. Objectively it gives no advantage, but poses the opponent problems he has to solve. It wouldn't have been strange to see it in a Lasker game.

Question: But if objectively they don't give an advantage, why are such moves so often successful?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because, as we have already seen, objectivity at the board is sometimes not the most important factor. In certain positions, with not much time available, it is hard to find the correct way if there are several ones that look similar.

When the correct defence is the only one then it is easier to find it.

The great strength Carlsen has, and Lasker before, is to create situations where it is not easy to find the best way.

18...Qxe3+?!

Played after a long reflection. Black accepts the challenge but he will be crushed.

Black didn't play 18...f5?! due to 19.Rf3 followed by Rg3, with a winning attack.

Question: How should Black have played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The g-file is very important at this moment, as we already saw. If Black does nothing to prevent it, White would play 19.Rf3 followed by Rg3. Kh1 followed by Rg1 is also possible, and 19.e4 and 19.f5 are ideas to consider.

Black could neutralize the danger of White's plan by playing 18...Kh7!, with the idea of 19...g6. Black's plan would be to play ...f5 followed by ...Be6, with a good position.

As h6 is defended, 19.Rf3?? loses to 19...g6. The typical combination 20.Qxh6+ Kxh6 doesn't work because the c8-bishop prevents 21.Rh3+.

After 19.f5 Black can play 19...Qxe3+ 20.Kh1 Qg5, if 21.Qh3 then 21...Re8 is possible, to neutralize the c3-bishop by playing 22...Be5.

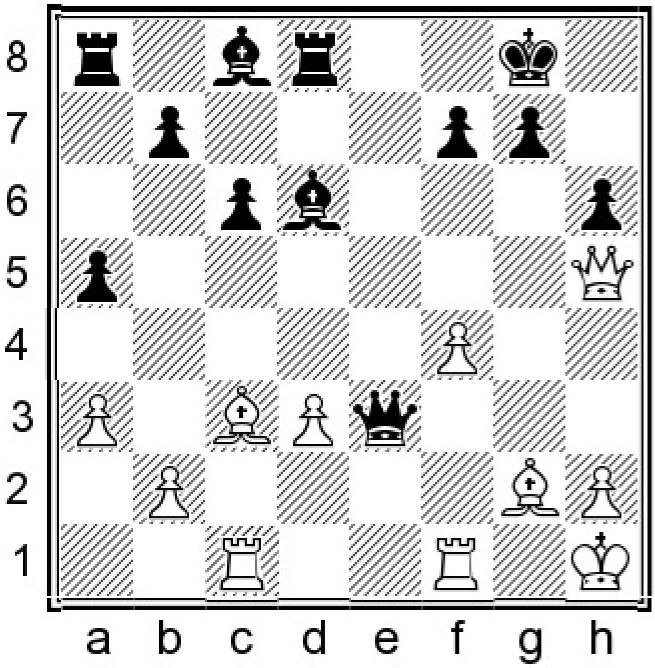
This defence was difficult to find at the board, of course, but for the best engines it is easier and they find it quickly.

19.Kh1 Rd8?!

This clears f8 for the bishop.

The counterattack 19...Be6 fails to 20.Rg1 or 20.Be4, and the g-file is decisive.

The best defence was 19...f6!, hindering the c3-bishop. White would have compensation for the pawn, but no clear way to get the advantage.



Exercise: How did the offensive continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.Rce1!

After 20...Qxd3 White cannot yet play 21.Be4? due to 21...Qh3!, but there is no defence after 21.f5!, planning 22.Be4 and Rg1; if 21...Qc4 then 22.Bxg7! Kxg7 23.f6+ is winning.

20...Qc5 21.f5! Bf8

If 21...f6 then simply 22.Be4 and 23.Rg1 is good enough, but there are also combinations with the black king as a target such as 22.Bxf6! gxf6 23.Qg6+ (quicker than the also winning 23.Rg1) 23...Kf8 24.Qxh6+ Kg8 25.Qg6+ Kf8 26.Qxf6+ Kg8 27.Rg1, and mate soon.

22.Be4

Following the known pattern, this clears the g-file and prepares Rg1.

22...Rd5

Black offers the exchange to soften the pressure.

If 22...Bd7 then 23.Rg1, threatening for example 24.Rxg7+ Bxg7 25.Rg1, and 23...Kh7 is no defence due to 24.Bxg7! Bxg7 and White has mate in five after either 25.f6+ or 25.Qxf7.

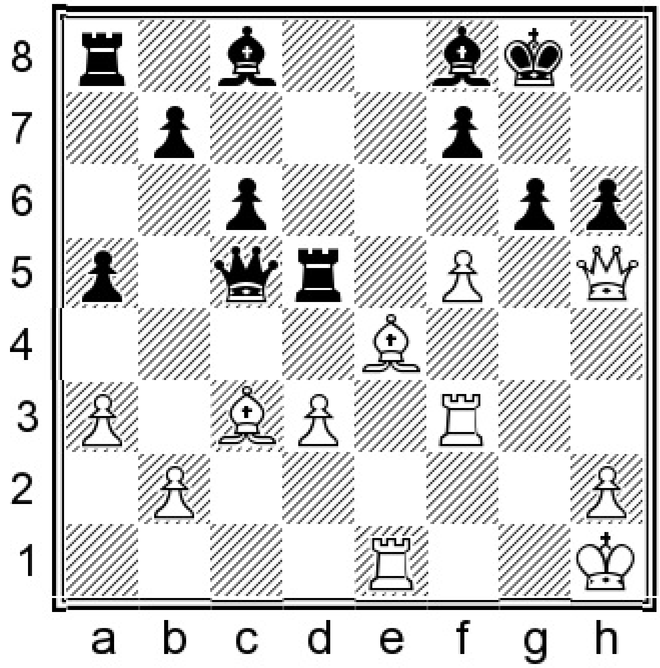
23.Rf3

With such a strong attack, Carlsen naturally didn’t consider taking the exchange, as it would have reduced his advantage.

Now f5 is defended so White plans to occupy the g-file.

23...b5

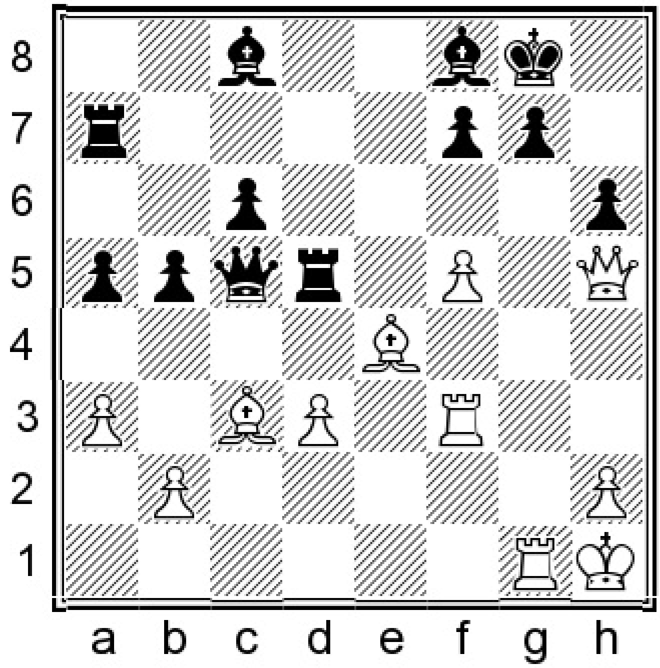
Exercise: How would White punish 23...g6?



Show/Hide Solution

Answer: 24.fxg6! wins (the queen is immune due to 25.gxf7#) 24...Qxc3!? 25.gxf7+ Kh8 26.Rg1, winning.

24.Rg1 Ra7



Exercise: There is more than one correct way to continue, and some wrong ones, so what would you choose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25.Bf6!

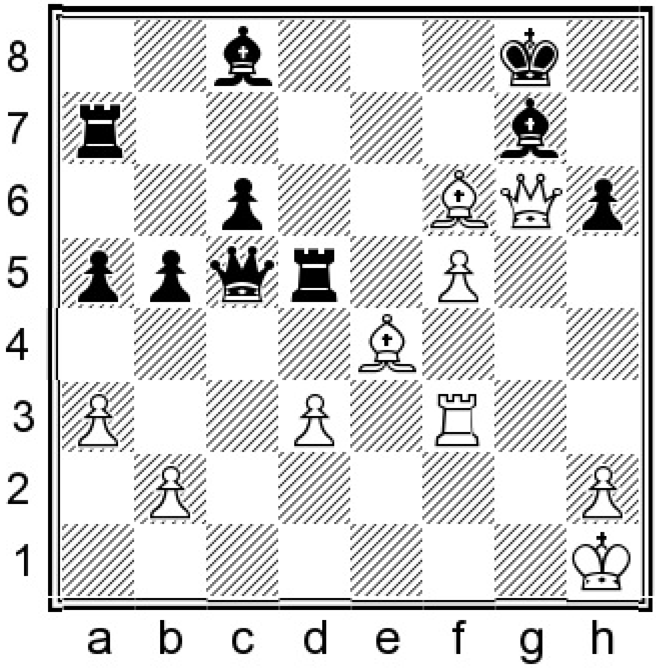
Impeding ...f6. If 25.Rxg7+?? Bxg7 26.Qg4 then 26...f6 and Black wins, showing the usefulness of 24...Ra7.

25.Qxh6? Qxg1+! was not good either, but 25.Rfg3! f6 26.Qxh6 was also strong, and there is no defence.

25...g6 26.Qh3

This move maintains the winning advantage, though Carlsen didn't see clearly the quickest win: 26.Rxg6+! fxg6 27.Qxg6+, and if 27...Rg7 then 28.Bxg7 Bxg7 29.Rg3 Qf8 30.Bxd5+ cxd5 31.f6 wins.

Exercise: If 27...Bg7 there is only one winning continuation, not easy to find at the board when considering 26.Rxg6+. What is it?



Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The rook advantage Black has is not enough to organise a defence. Black is surprisingly defenceless after the slow retreat 28.Bc3!, planning 29.f6.

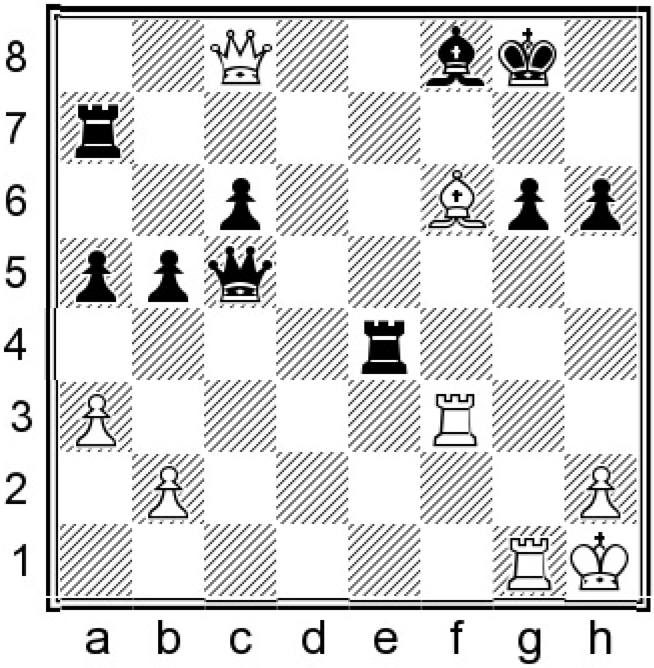
26...Rd6

In case of 26...b4 Carlsen was going to play 27.Qf1, unpinning the queen to take on g6 and after 27...g5 he would come back with 28.Qh3!, planning the winning 29.Rxg5+.

27.Qh4

Maintaining the winning advantage again. Now 28.fxg6 is threatened, and wins the exchange.

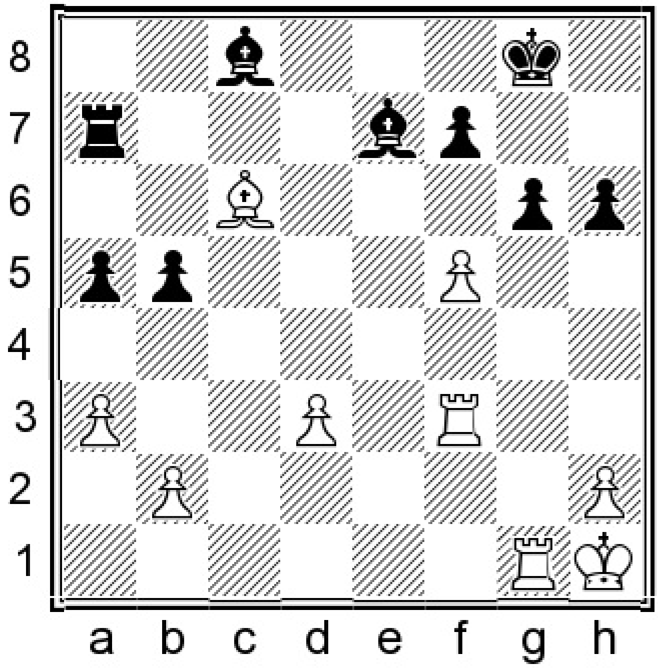
Carlsen's original idea was 27.d4!, which is quicker, and after 27...Rxd4 28.fxg6 Rxe4 (if 28...Bxh3 then 29.gxf7+ Kxf7 30.Bd4+, winning) 29.Qxc8 fxg6, there is a hidden winning move again.



30.Rxg6+ Kh7 31.Rg1 Rf7 is not so clear, but White wins in a similar way to the one we saw, the quiet retreat 30.Bc3!, tying the black king to the defence of the bishop. If 30...g5 then 31.Rgf1 Rf4 32.Qe6+ Kh7 33.Rxf4 gxf4 34.Qe4+ Kg8 35.Rg1+ Bg7, and just when everything seems defended, 36.Bd4! wins, as the a7-rook is lost.

Of course, the variations quoted are just examples, and it was almost impossible to calculate all these variations at the board with limited time to analyse.

27...Rxf6 28.Qxf6 Be7 29.Qxc6 Qxc6 30.Bxc6



Black has no compensation for the exchange. The rest is elementary technique, and Carlsen doesn't fail.

30...Kg7 31.fxg6 fxg6 32.d4 a4 33.d5

This advance has an added virtue: it undermines the poison from a future ...Bb7.

33...b4 34.Be8

This is possible thanks to 33.d5.

34...Bg5 35.h4 Bxh4 36.Rxg6+ Kh7 37.Rc6 Bg4 38.Rf4 Rg7

Black lost on time, but there are several winning moves, including 39.Rcc4 h5 40.Bxh5, while the easiest way is maybe to simplify by playing 39.Bg6+.

1–0

We see again a "Laskerian" approach from Carlsen to the game: the importance of the practical element. He created very dynamic play from almost nowhere, offering a tempting pawn, but with poison.

Carlsen commented that he played this game in an "interesting, dynamic style, this is not the usual way I win my games, so it was funny."

Anyway, the next day he felt frustrated when he realised that he hadn't played the stronger options on moves 26 and 27, showing a high level of self-criticism.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) A position may be objectively equal, but sometimes it is not so easy to maintain equality. (*18*...K*h7!*)

2.) To unbalance a position it is important to create complexity where the opponent has several choices. (16.Qh5! 17.f4! 18.gxf4!)

3.) Prophylactic thinking! Before moving, ask yourself what the opponent is going to do in response. (*21.f5! 21.*B*e4?* – commenting White’s 20th move)

4.) Great champions are highly self-demanding.

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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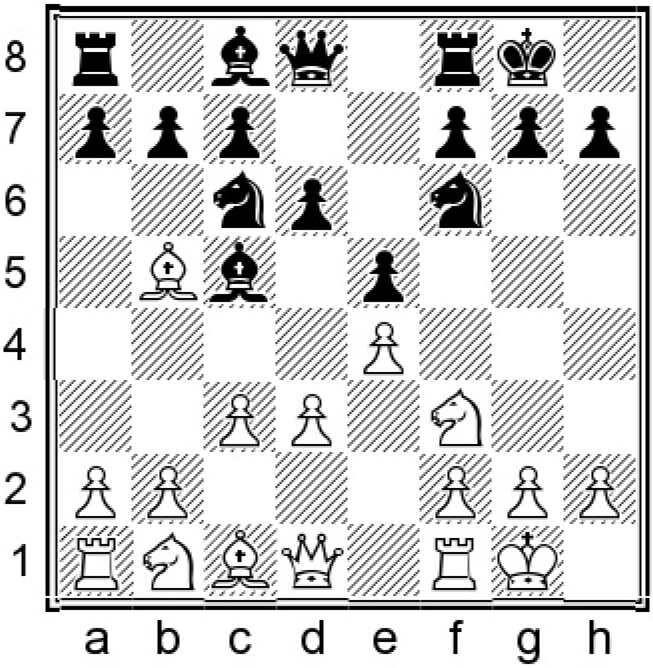
Game 27

Magnus Carlsen – Alexander Grischuk

Ruy Lopez [C65]

Gashimov Memorial, Shamkir (9), 09.04.2019

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.c3 0-0 6.0-0 d6



7.Ba4

Question: What an odd move! The queenside is undeveloped and White moves a piece already developed... Isn't there a more useful move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The move may look odd at first sight, yes. The bishop moves before being expelled by ...a6. White has moves available like 7.Nbd2, 7.Re1 or even 7.h3, but none of them is clearly better. Time is not so important in this position, as there are no threatens and no possibility of activating the pieces quickly. The chosen move has an idea behind it, as we shall see.

7...Ne7

Black plays a typical knight manoeuvre to put it on g6. It will defend the e5-pawn from there too, and allows an opportune ...c6, which gives the dark-squared bishop space to withdraw and prepares a future ...d5.

Carlsen had this position at the board before. Carlsen – Andreikin, St. Petersburg 2018 (rapid) continued 7...Bb6 8.Nbd2 Ne7 9.Nc4, and the b6-bishop did not escape in time. After 9...Ng6 10.h3 h6 11.Bc2 Be6 12.Nxb6 axb6 13.d4, White has a slight advantage.

8.Bc2

What Carlsen plays look consistent with 7.Ba4, although an important example, Karjakin – Jakovenko, St. Petersburg 2018 (blitz), continued 8.Nbd2 Ng6 9.d4 Bb6 10.Re1.

8...Ng6

Exercise (simple): How to complete the idea initiated with 7.Ba4?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

9.d4

Occupying the center, now that the e4-pawn is defended by the manoeuvre Ba4-c2. White would play the same had Black continued 8...Bb6 instead of 8...Ng6.

9...Bb6

Exercise: Carlsen played one of his favourite moves next, can you guess it?

Show/Hide Solution

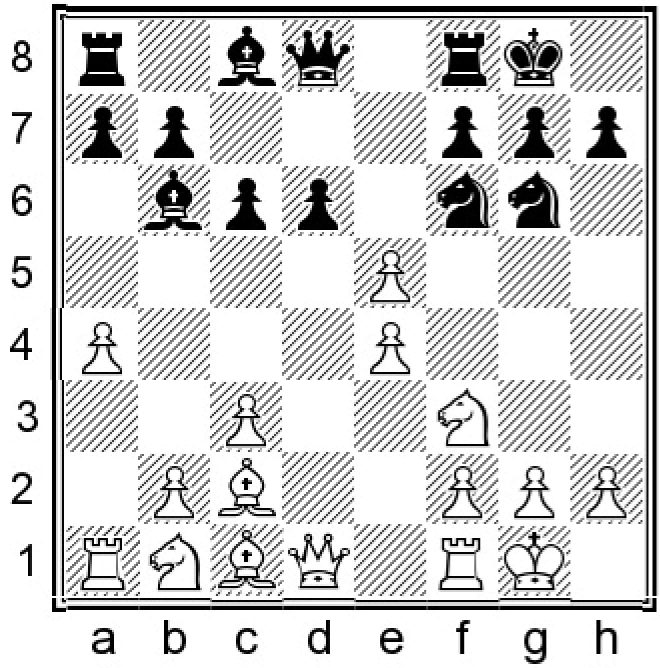
Answer:

10.a4

Carlsen frequently plays this move in similar situations. Now there is a direct threat to win a piece, but not only this. The idea is to advance the pawn later to create discomfort.

An added possibility, in case Black takes on d4, is to use the third rank to transfer the rook to the kingside, as we saw, for example, in Game 11 (Carlsen – Anand, Sochi m/2, 2014). Lately, Carlsen has been frequently playing the advance h4, depending on the structure, of course. According to his second Nielsen, this was influenced by AlphaZero.

10...c6 11.dxe5



Question: Why did Carlsen eliminate the tension? I understand this is only done if there is a clear reason. What is the urgency in this case?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There is nothing urgent, and no aspiration for a great edge either. Carlsen decides to eliminate the tension with a concrete idea in mind.

11...Nxe5 12.Nxe5

Now there is a new argument for 11.dxe5: the exchanged black knight spent two tempi to relocate to g6, which were effectively lost. Those two moves were used by White to play Bc2 and a4.

12...dxe5 13.Qxd8 Rxd8

The ending allows a long battle, as we know. Carlsen likes to play endings like this one, full of life.

Exercise: What was the idea behind 12.Nxe5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.a5

This was not possible without exchanging queens. It is the culmination of one of the ideas behind 10.a4, to increase pressure on the queenside.

14...Bc5

Nobody voluntarily likes to play a passive move like 14...Bc7, although it was also possible of course. One idea would be a timely ...b6, as Nielsen commented. The position would be positionally complex.

15.Nd2 Be6

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

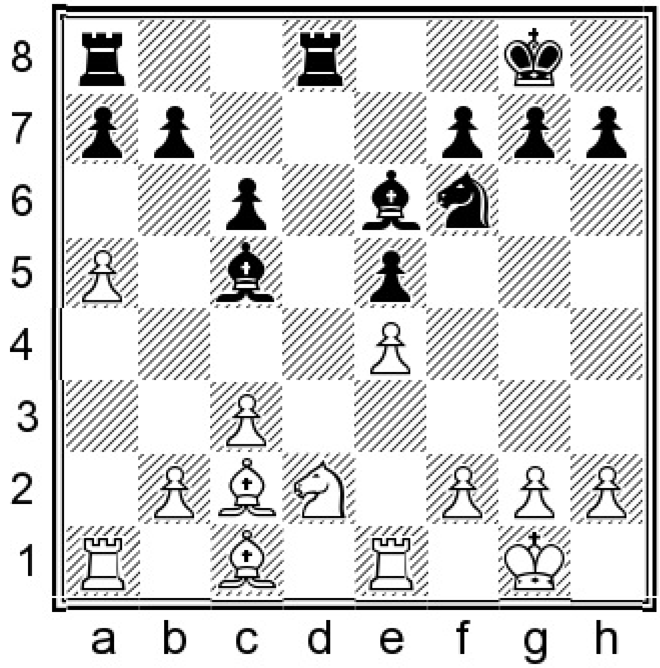
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Re1

Continuing with the idea. It prepares 17.Nb3 followed by 18.Be3, with slight pressure on the queenside.

16.Nb3? was not possible yet due to 16...Nxe4!



16...b5

Grischuk criticized this move, blaming it for his defeat.

Some months after this game, playing with the White pieces, Grischuk had this position in front of him again, in Amsterdam (rapid). Giri chose 16...h6!, not a particularly impressive move but a useful waiting one. Only after 17.h3 did Giri play 17...b5, reaching a favourable version of what happens in the game, which we shall see later.

17.Nb3 Bxb3

Played after 27 minutes of reflection.

Grischuk didn't like the retreats 17...Be7 or 17...Bd6, as White could eventually play a6, fixing the weakness on a7 which can be pressed later with Be3.

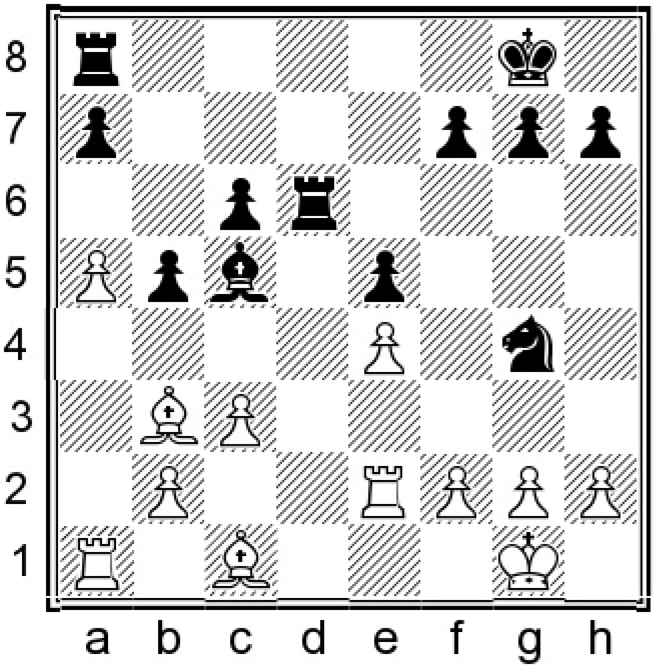
17...Nd7 doesn't look attractive either, as after 18.Nxc5 Nxc5 19.Be3 Nd7?! 20.Rad1 or 20.a6 White is clearly better thanks to his space advantage and the two bishops.

Nielsen mentioned the resource 19...Bb3!, but after 20.Bxc5 Bxc2 21.a6 Black's position is not pleasant. He is tied to the defence of the a7-pawn, which is not nice for humans, although the engines believe in that defence.

18.Bxb3 Ng4

Looking for activity before White can coordinate his forces, but this will be neutralised by an excellent manoeuvre. A different idea was suggested, 18...Rab8 19.Kf1 b4, although after 20.Ba4 Black's position is still not very comfortable.

19.Re2 Rd6



Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.Bg5!

Preventing the threat 20...Nxf2 21.Rxf2 Rf6 with a developing move.

Not 20...h6? of course, due to 21.Be7.

Now we clearly see that 16...h6!, played in the Grischuk – Giri game, was an improvement. Giri also took on b3 there, but White’s position was less dangerous without this key move.

20...Kf8 21.Rf1!

Question: Why is this move so special? It is not very impressive.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Right, it is not very impressive, but it is only the beginning of a promising plan.

21...Nf6

Exercise: What luft did Carlsen choose?

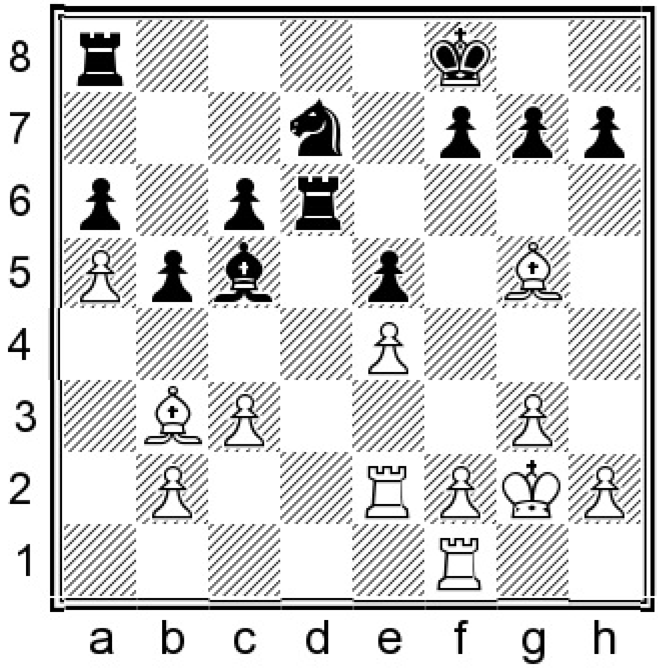
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22.g3!

“Combining the necessary with the useful,” as Nielsen commented. White plans to continue with Kg2 followed by a timely f4, and the f1-rook will be ideally placed.

22...a6 23.Kg2 Nd7



Exercise: How did Carlsen now reorganize his forces?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24.Bc1!

The bishop goes back to prepare f4 in good conditions. This marks a retreat to the initial square, but in this case it doesn’t bother the mobility of the other forces or the bishop himself.

24...Ba7 25.f4 f6

Exercise: How did Carlsen improve his chances?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.h4!

This can be considered Carlsen’s new “favourite move”, especially when Black has played ...g6. Due to AlphaZero? Maybe, but only partially.

Here Carlsen wants to use the pawn as a battering ram, to open lines or move it to h6, depending on Black’s answer. Here White can do it for “free”, because Black has no counterplay.

26...Re8 27.h5 h6

Black doesn't want to allow the advance h6.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue here?

Show/Hide Solution

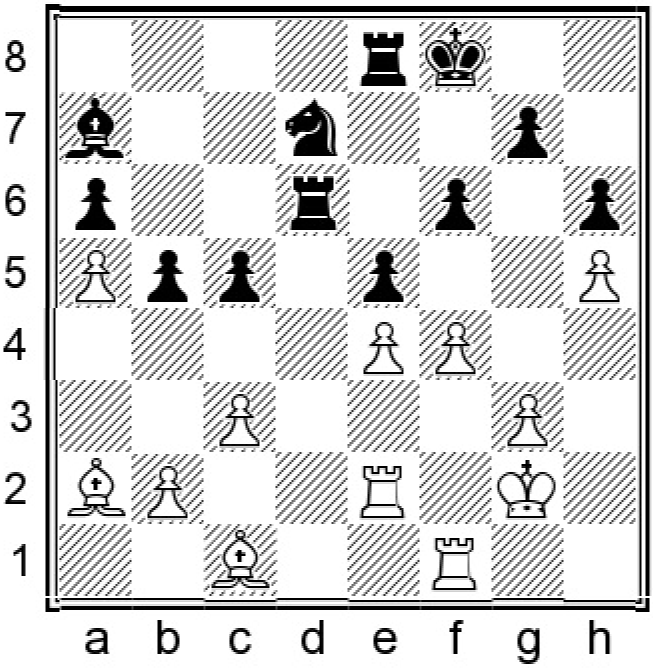
Answer:

28.Ba2!

With no rush, the bishop evades a potential attack with ...Nc5 and prepares a possible advance b4.

28...c5

Trying to play ...c4 (and maybe ...Nc5 next), monitoring the a2-bishop and dominating b3 and d3. 28...exf4 29.gxf4 Nc5 was suggested, to answer 30.e5 with 30...Nd3, but allowing the white pawns mobility and opening the game is not attractive at the board. After 31.Bd2 Black's problems continue, and 31...Nxb2? is not possible due to 32.Be3!, winning material.



After 28...c5 Carlsen commented "Ugly, because it blocks the bishop," and he thought this was the decisive mistake, but Grischuk pointed out at the press conference that it looked to him like now was the perfect timing to play it, as White, due to the weakness of the e4-pawn, still seemingly needs to consolidate before taking other measures.

Exercise: In which way did Carlsen show he was right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.Be3!!

With a surprising and beautiful sacrifice of the central pawn to stop ...c4. White plans to play 30.Rfe1 and then Bd5, paralysing the black position, but not the immediate 30.Bd5 due to the resource 30...exf4 31.gxf4 c4! 32.Bxa7 Rxd5, taking advantage of the unprotected position of the e2-rook.

29...exf4 30.gxf4 Rxe4 31.Bb1

Question: Really? Leaving the a2-g8 diagonal?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: As we shall see, this is part of the strong rearrangement White had in mind when he played 29.Be3!!. Acceptance of the pawn sacrifice leads to the opening of the e-file and the b1-h7 diagonal.

31...Re7

Exercise: What is the complement of the previous move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32.Rfe1!

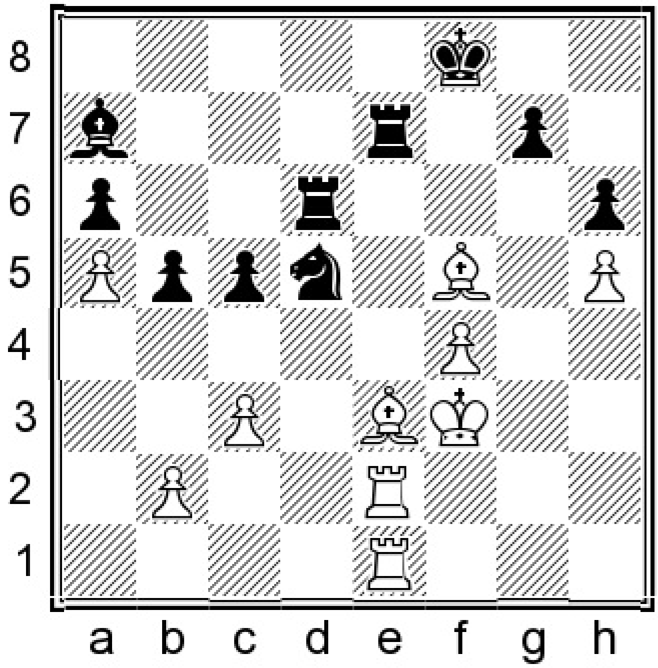
Increasing pressure on the e-file, with the idea of 33.Bg6 followed by e.g. 34.Bxc5.

32...f5?!

Black tries to activate the passive knight. The engines suggest 32...Nb8!, to continue with ...Nc6, although after 33.Kf3 Nc6 34.Bf5 White avoids 34...Rdd7 and maintains the initiative. 34...c4? would then be bad due to 35.Bxa7 Rxe2 36.Rxe2 Nxa7 37.Bg6! Rd8 38.Re6, winning the a6-pawn.

33.Bxf5 Nf6 34.Kf3 Nd5

Of course not 34...Nxh5 due to 35.Bxc5.



Grischuk said he didn’t see clearly what was going on: “There are pins, counter-pins, some mating nets. Sometimes it’s good for Black, sometimes good for White...,” and he added, “I suspected it’s bad.”

Exercise: Carlsen clarified the situation with his next move. What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

35.Rd2!

A quiet and devastating move. It was a complete surprise for Grischuk, who was expecting 35.Bd2 Rxe2 36.Rxe2 Ne7 without much to fear.

White threatens to take advantage of the pin with 36.Be4 and there is no good defence.

35...Rd8

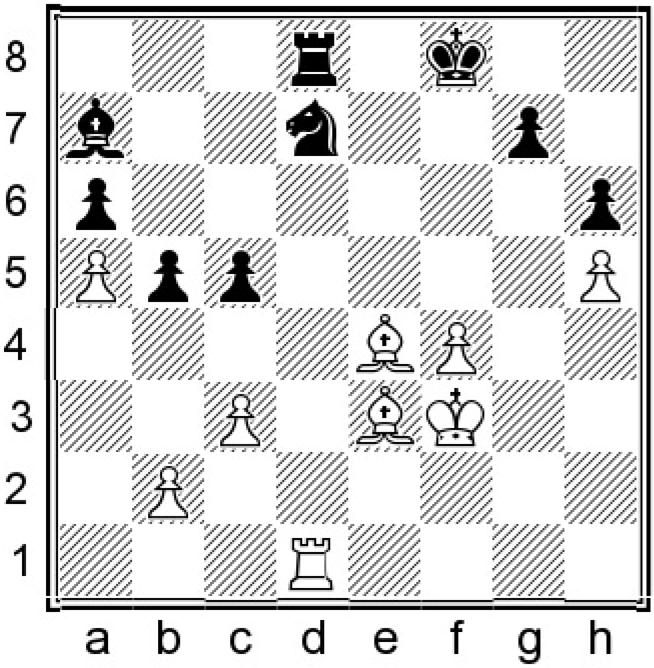
As usually happens, tactics favour the better developed side. If 35...Nxe3 then 36.Rxd6 Nxf5 37.Rxe7 and the two pieces are no match for the rook and the free a-pawn, for example: 37...Nxe7 38.Rxa6 Bb8 39.Ra8! Nc6 40.a6, planning 41.Rxb8 Nxb8 42.a7. Both players saw the beautiful refutation of 35...Bb8: there would follow 36.Bxc5! Rxe1 37.Rxd5 Ke7, and now the second key move, 38.Re5+! Rxe5 39.fxe5, winning thanks to a new pin.

36.Be4 Red7 37.Red1

Completing White’s idea and winning material.

37...Nf6 38.Rxd7 Nxd7

After 38...Rxd7 a winning line is 39.Rxd7 Nxd7 40.Bb7 Nb8 and now 41.b4 or even 41.Ke4 and Black is virtually paralyzed.



Exercise: Carlsen made the strongest move in this position. What was it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39.Rd6!

There is no defence against 40.Rxa6 Bb8 41.Ra8 and the a-pawn decides the game.

1–0

Carlsen didn't obtain anything from the opening, but an ending with a slight initiative soon appeared, which normally promises a long fight in Carlsen's hands. The initiative was transformed into possession of the two bishops, usually a formidable Carlsen weapon, although in this ending it didn't look so important. In any event, with slight improvements the bishop pair continued to gain considerable strength.

Carlsen obtained a decisive advantage through a surprising pawn sacrifice, opening the game for his two bishops and finishing with a lethal pin along a central file.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) "First the idea and then the move!" (Najdorf). (7.Ba4! 22.g3! 24.Bc1! 29.Be3!!)

2.) Experience joined with analysis helps to understand the position better and discover improvements. (*16...h6!*)

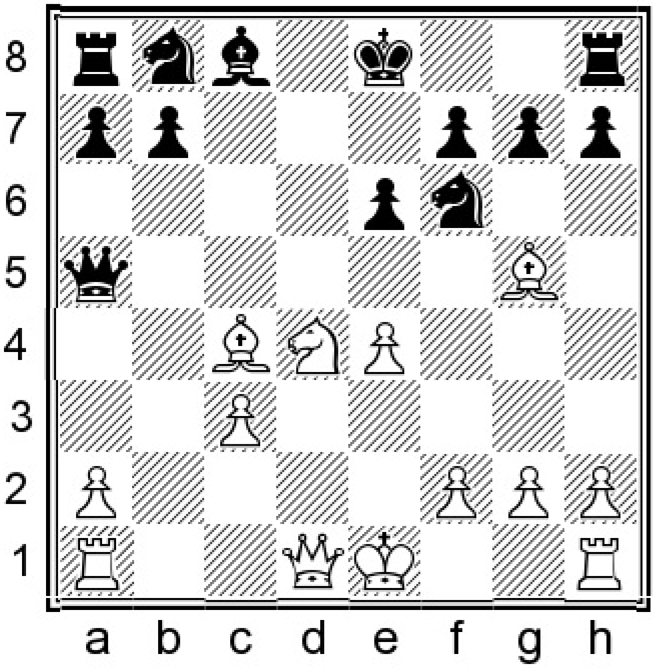
3.) When the opponent has no clear counterplay sometimes there is enough time to improve the position, placing the pieces on better squares and gaining more space before taking concrete measures. (26.h4! 28.Ba2!)

4.) Tactics generally help the side with more active pieces, but in any case you have to calculate in depth before entering complications. (35.Rd2! 39.Rd6!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 28
Magnus Carlsen – Levon Aronian
Queen's Gambit [D39]
Karlsruhe/Baden-Baden (7), 27.04.2019

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 d5 4.Nc3 dxc4 5.e4 Bb4 6.Bg5 c5 7.Bxc4 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bxc3+ 9.bxc3 Qa5



10.Bd2

Question: What a passive move. This isn't the most common move here, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Indeed, it was a novelty at this high level. 10.Bb5+, 10.Bxf6 and 10.Nb5 are more usual. Whether it is passive is less clear. First of all, it is a pawn sacrifice, and secondly there is the practical element. White is in familiar terrain, while Black probably is not. It is not an objective advantage at the board, but it may force his opponent to spend more time on solving the “new” problems of the position.

10...0-0

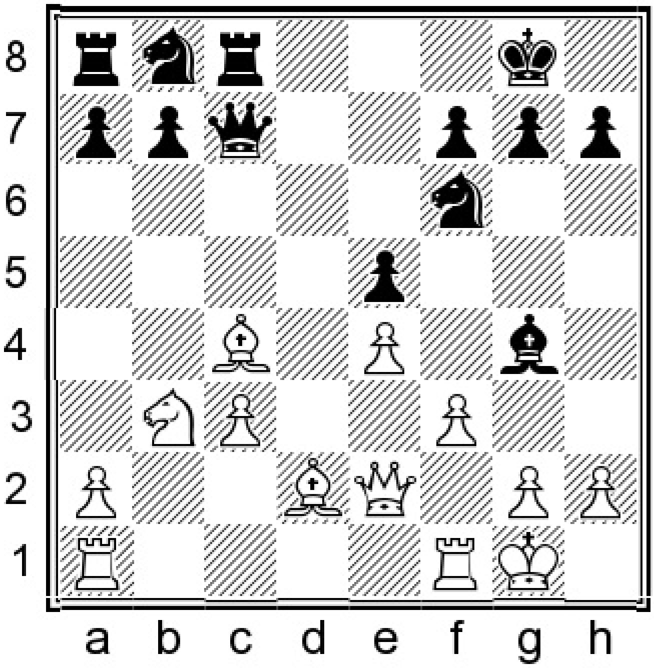
Black chooses the safest answer. After 10...Nxe4 there would follow 11.Qg4 Nxd2 12.Qxg7, and in case of 12...Rf8 13.Kxd2 Qc5 14.Bd3 White seems to be better.

The critical line is 12...Nxc4! 13.Qxh8+ Ke7 14.0-0, which looks dangerous, because the weakness of the black king is evident, although the engines are not afraid of it.

11.Qe2 e5 12.Nb3 Qc7 13.0-0 Bg4

We cannot talk about an advantage for White. Black is fine and has several good choices. The move chosen by Aronian tries to accelerate development. It received some criticism, but it is not bad and maybe not inferior to the alternatives 13...Re8, 13...b6, or the more incisive 13...a5.

14.f3 Rc8



This was the idea, to activate the rook with tempo.

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15.Bd5!

Rejecting 15.Bxf7+ Qxf7 16.fxg4 threatening f5 due to 16...Qc4!, and Black gets a good position.

Question: But the move played allows the exchange of the bishop and the structure doesn't seem to improve. Why is it so good?

Show/Hide Solution

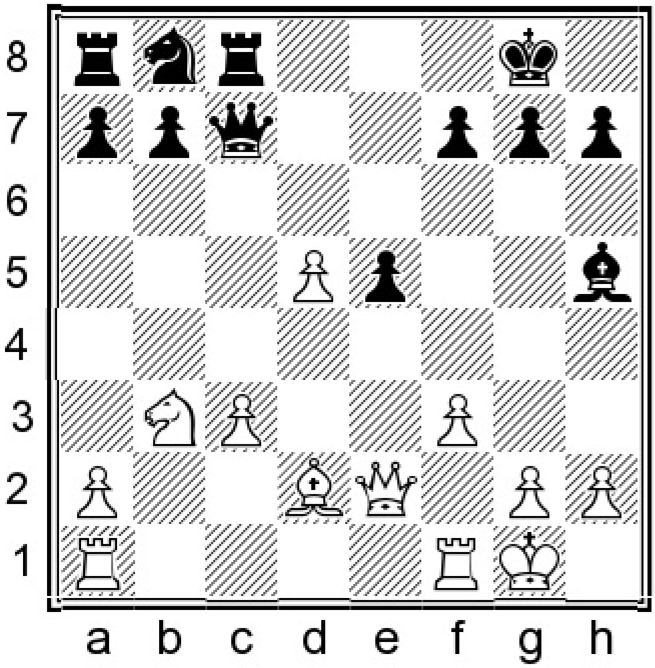
Answer: As almost always, there is a tactical explanation. We shall see it soon.

15...Nxd5 16.exd5 Bh5

Question: The bishop may end up out of play on h5. Is this the best retreat?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The bishop may be rather passive on h5, it's true, but it has some virtues. It stops f4, which is important given that the black king has no defenders, and also White must keep an eye out for the advance ...e4. Had Black chosen 16...Bd7 or 16...Bf5, then 17.f4 would have followed.



Exercise: What idea did Carlsen have in mind?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17.c4!

White, helped by tactics (the pawn cannot be taken due to Rc1), improves his pawn structure, creating a wedge. The annoying d5-pawn is solid.

Carlsen said after the game that after this advance “Objectively it isn’t really anything, but if anyone wants to try, it is White.”

17...Nd7

Exercise: Now the c4-pawn is threatened, how to defend it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.Rfc1

The right rook, as after 18.Rac1 a5 “Black has some tricks” (Carlsen).

18...b6 19.a4

Now the positional threat a5 must be considered on every move.

19...a5

Black eliminates that possibility, at an obvious price. Now the b6-pawn is a weakness, which is not really important now, but it could be in the future.

19...Qd6 was suggested, to answer 20.a5 with 20...b5, and with the idea of responding to the regrouping Qf2 followed by Be3 with the eventual ...Qb4 combined with ...Bg6, and White should take ...Bd3 into consideration. White would probably play 20.Be1 (and then Bf2) to free his queen along the second rank. Of course not 20.Be3? due to 20...e4!

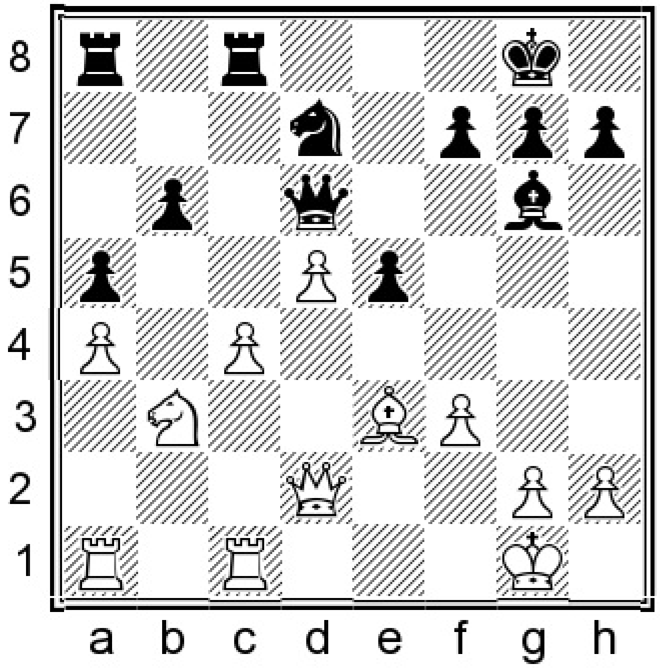
20.Qf2

Like before, this precaution is necessary in order to be able to play Be3 without allowing ...e4.

20...Qd6 21.Be3 Bg6

The bishop comes back to the game, keeping watch over the d3 square. We are in a manoeuvring phase where there are several moves of equal strength, including 21...Qb4, although after 22.Qc2 the situation doesn’t really change.

22.Qd2



Question: White finally has his queen more active and freer, but he is not making tangible progress, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, there isn’t anything special yet, and he needs to continue manoeuvring.

Black must be alert to a possible advance c5, and White must be aware of the possibilities his opponent has, too. As Carlsen explained: “I don’t want to go for 22.Qb2 when he has the g6-square available, as after 22...Bd3 23.Nd2 then 23...Qg6 and he has counterplay with ...h5 and so on.”

22...f6

Black had several possibilities, including 22...Rc7, without fearing the sudden advance 23.c5. There could follow 23...Nxc5 24.Bxc5 bxc5 25.Nxa5, and now, among other ideas, 25...Bd3! 26.Qxd3 Rxa5, and Black is no worse.

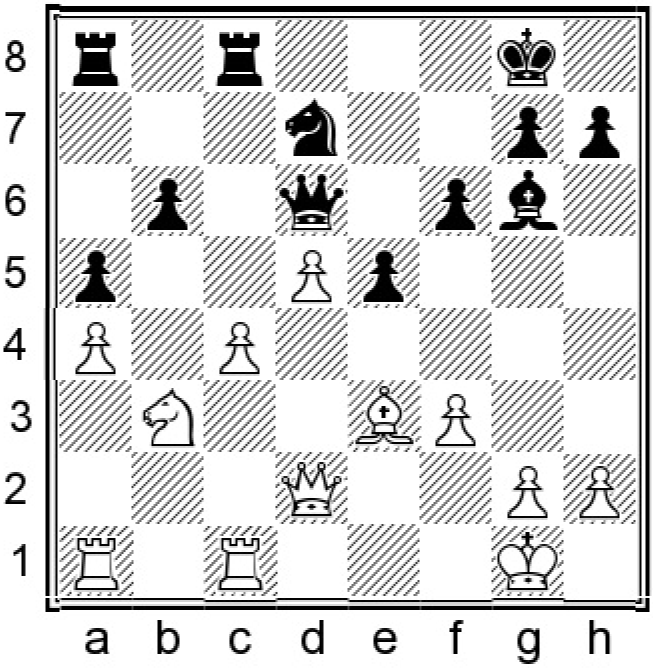
The advance chosen may be questionable. Carlsen was pleased to see it, though. He said the position was maybe still good for White without 22...f6, but now he was more comfortable.

Question: Really? Now the e5-pawn is well supported and allows the bishop’s recycling via f7. Why is it so questionable?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: No, it is not a big deal, but Carlsen considered it was good for him that the black queen cannot go to the kingside with ...Qg6 and create counterplay on that flank.

Now it is harder for Black to activate his forces. “Eventually, I will have something on the queenside,” said Carlsen.



Exercise: How did Carlsen slightly improve his chances?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23.Qb2!

Looking for chances on the queenside, White plans to play an opportune Qa3. The exchange of queens clearly favours White, because the weakness created on b6 becomes more important. White can increase the pressure on it, while the weak c4-pawn is defended without difficulty by the white knight.

23...Rc7

Black could try to create discomfort among the white pieces playing 23...Qb4. After 24.Bd2 Qd6 the bishop occupies the ideal square for the knight, while after 24.Qc3 Qd6 25.Nd2 Nc5 26.Qa3 “it’s actually better for Black to have the rook on c8 rather on c7, which becomes evident after 26...Rab8 27.Nb3, and now the very strong 27...Qc7!” (Giri). From c7 the queen defends c5 and also a5, preventing 28.Bxc5.

Exercise: How did White proceed?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24.Nd2

Quietly. Not yet 24.Qa3?! due to 24...Qxa3 25.Rxa3 Bf7, and suddenly the White pieces are uncoordinated (26.Nd2? Bxd5).

24...Nc5

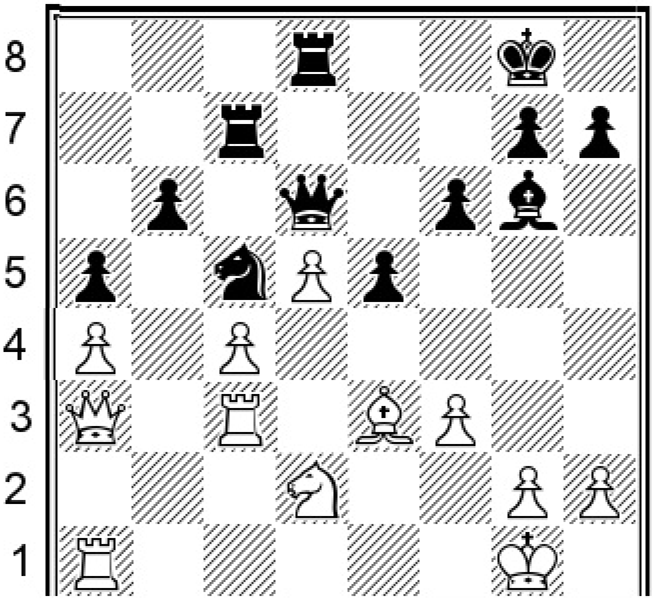
Aronian criticized this move after the game. Carlsen said it was a product of not seeing anything good, something that solves the little problems Black had. To add more trouble, Aronian had just a minute to reach time control.

If 24...Rac8 then 25.Qa3 will definitively follow.

25.Qa3 Rd8

The engines suggest defending with 25...Qf8, and after 26.Rc3, preventing the jump of the knight to d3, to continue with 26...Rb8. However, this passive deployment was not pleasant of course.

26.Rc3



26...f5?

Black tries to gain counterplay on “his” flank at all cost. It is logical, but it will fail, and this advance was the first and only clear mistake committed by Black.

It was necessary to continue with waiting moves like 26...Rb7. White is slightly better, but there is nothing concrete yet.

From the practical point of view, the situation was, however, different. Black was in severe time trouble, and Carlsen was playing very well. Both of these facts were to affect the game.

Exercise: How did Carlsen show that the advance ...f5 was a mistake?

☐ Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.Re1!

And the e5-pawn becomes a serious weakness. Its advance is not to be feared and it doesn't help the activity of the black pieces. White plans 28.Bxc5 followed by Rbe3.

27...e4

Carlsen thought that maybe Black had to try 27...f4 "maybe he had some tricks," after e.g. 28.Bxc5 Rxc5 29.Rb3 Bc2 30.Rb2? (30.Rc3 was necessary) 30...Rxd5!, or 29.Qb2 Rcc8 30.Rb3 Qc5+ 31.Kh1?! Qf2.

White could also play more slowly, with 29.h3 followed by Kh2, and only then go after the e5- or b6-pawns.

Black couldn't make any serious threat.

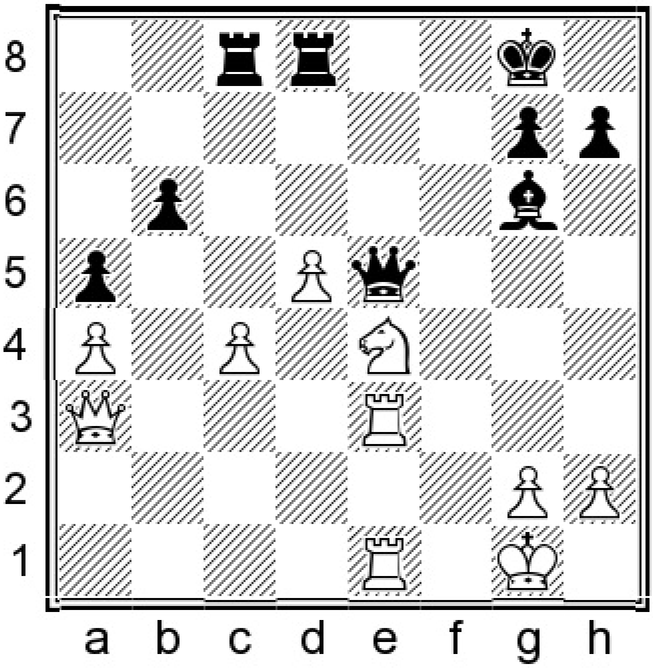
28.fxe4 fxe4 29.Bxc5 Rxc5

Or 29...Qxc5+ 30.Qxc5, "and whatever he takes with I put my c-rook on the b-file and my king on e3. It should be at least very bad for Black" (Carlsen).

30.Nxe4 Qe5 31.Rce3

And the coordination of the white pieces is perfect. 31...Rxc4? is bad due to 32.Nd2.

31...Rcc8



32.h3!

Question: An exclamation mark? Surely not a really impressive move.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This modest move is the first choice of the engines. Carlsen characterised it as “a very clever waiting move,” undoubtedly more unpleasant for Black due to his time trouble.

White reinforces his position, maintaining the pressure and leaving Black with a decision to take.

After the immediate 32.Nc5 Qd6 33.Ne6 Qxa3 34.Rxa3 Rd6 “White may have problems with his c4-pawn,” said Carlsen. It was better to maintain the knight jump as a threat, so if after the text move 32...Qd4 then 33.Nd6 followed by Kh1 is very strong.

32...Qc7

Had Black played a similar waiting move, an also apparently useful one such as 32...h6, Carlsen was going to play 33.Nc5!. The difference is that after 33...Qd6 34.Ne6 Qxa3 35.Rxa3 Rd6, White now has the strong 36.Rg3!, as Carlsen pointed out (36...Kh7 37.Rf1).

33.Nd2

“He has no counterplay in any place” (Carlsen).

33...Re8

Exercise: What did Carlsen choose now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

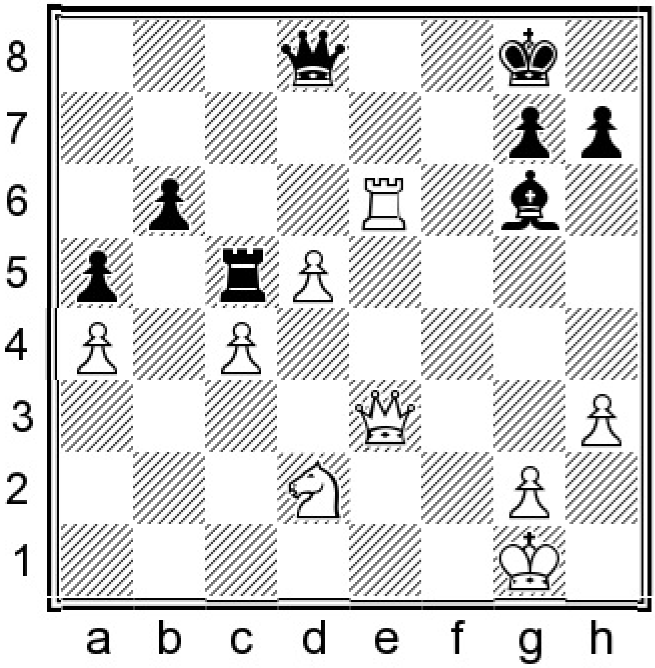
34.Re7!

After the exchange of a pair of rooks Black’s second rank will be weaker and with every simplification the d5-pawn becomes stronger.

34...Rxe7 35.Rxe7 Qd8

If the more tenacious 35...Qf4, then 36.Qc3 is possible, and after 36...Bf7 White can simplify, playing 37.Qe3 or even 37.Qf3.

36.Qe3 Rc7 37.Re6 Rc5



Exercise (simple): There are several good moves. What is the simplest way to win?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38.Qb3

Winning a second pawn. 38.Qe5 and 38.Nf3 were also valid.

1–0

This game was decided by a single clear positional mistake committed by Black.

Carlsen commented: "It looks like he shouldn't really be worse at all, but it quickly became very unpleasant for him," and added "It is very strange, you make all these natural moves [with Black] and then you are somehow stuck. My play is so simple, I know what my moves are going to be and it was much more difficult for him." Also important was the severe time trouble from which Black suffered.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Sometimes an unexpected idea in the opening creates practical problems that are difficult to solve at the board. (10.Bd2!)

2.) "If one piece is badly placed, the whole position is bad." (Tarrasch). Maybe the distance of the h5-bishop was not so serious in this game, but it obliged Black to be constantly on the defence, and drove him to decisive time trouble.

3.) "Pawns don't move backwards." A change in the pawn structure may seriously impact the course of the game. (17.c4! 22...f6? 26...f5?)

4.) We must not only consider our own plans. It is useful to ask "What is my opponent threatening?" or "What is my opponent intending to play?" (20.Qf2! *22.*Q*b2?* 22.Qd2! *24.*Q*a3?*)

5.) "Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?" If you can find the right answers, you'll probably discover the correct plan. (23.Qb2! 34.Re7!)

6.) Almost any position offers chances to fight, as Lasker showed us. (*27...f4!?*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 29
Magnus Carlsen – Alexander Grischuk

Grunfeld Defence [D85]

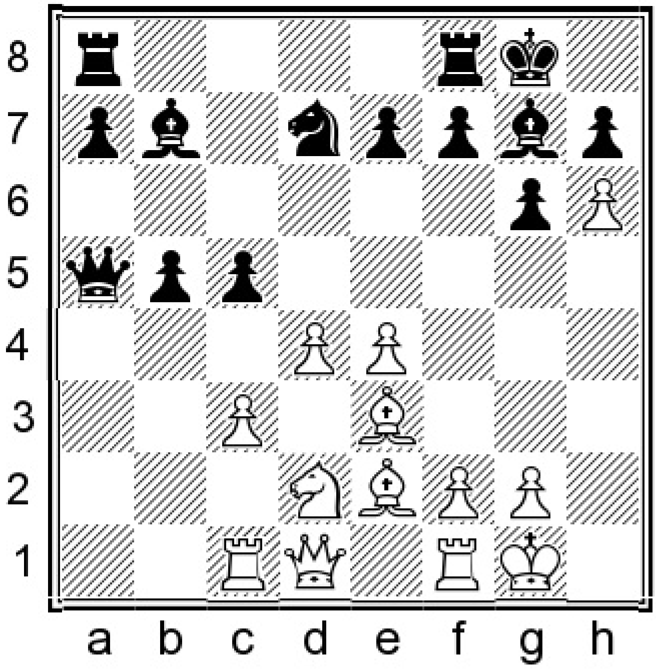
Norway Chess, Stavanger, (3) 06.06.2019

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5

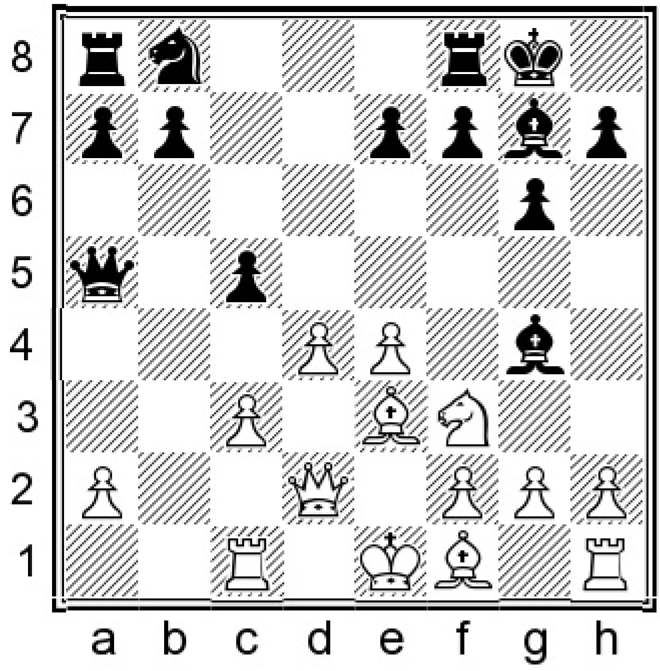
Carlsen commented in the “Confession booth” (a room intended for the players to give messages to the spectators during the games) that he was convinced Grischuk would play the Grunfeld, while his second Nielsen thought it would be a Kings Indian.

4.cxd5 Nxd5 5.e4 Nxc3 6.bxc3 Bg7 7.Be3 c5 8.Rc1 Qa5

In the same, tournament Mamedyarov twice preferred 8...0-0 against Carlsen (blitz and classical). After 9.Nf3 Nd7 10.Be2 Qa5 11.0-0 Qxa2 12.Nd2 Qa5 13.h4 b5 14.h5 Bb7 Carlsen played 15.h6, which Nielsen considered a significant contribution from AlphaZero: advancing h4 with the idea not only of opening the h-file, but also of playing h6 in certain positions, restricting both the opponent’s movement and space.



9.Qd2 0-0 10.Nf3 Bg4



11.d5

Carlsen is not afraid of 11...Bxf3, so he doesn't consider it necessary to play 11.Ng5 or 11.Be2 and plans to follow with 12.c4.

11...b5

Rejecting 11...Nd7, although Grischuk had beaten Kramnik in 2014 with that move (at the same tournament, but five years earlier). He plays an unusual move supported by some rather old analysis which concluded that the c5-pawn does not first need to be protected by either 11...Nd7 or 11...Na6 before Black plays ...b5.

Question: Why didn't he repeat that successful line?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because even though he won, the line was not entirely satisfactory for Black. After 12.c4 Qa3 13.Be2 Bxf3 14.Bxf3 Bd4 15.Bxd4 cxd4 16.0-0 Ne5 17.Qxd4 Nxf3+ 18.gxf3 Qxf3 19.Rc3 White was better thanks to his strong center.

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply to Grischuk's pawn sacrifice?

Show/Hide Solution

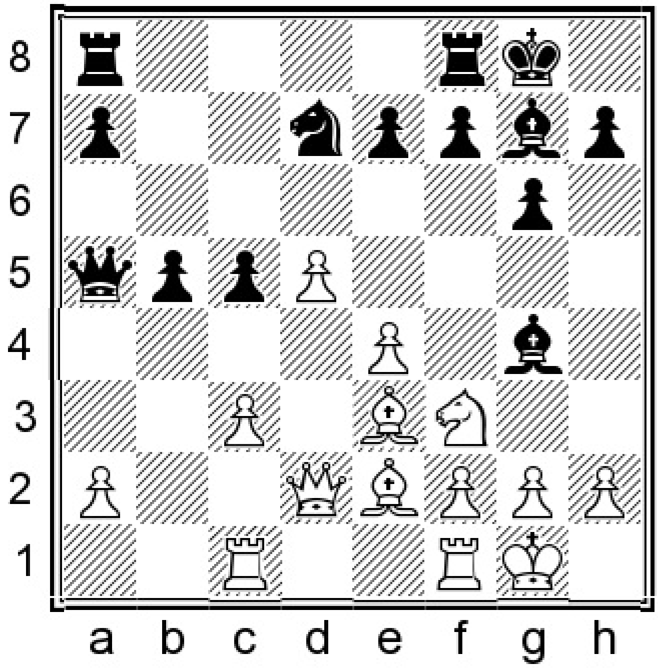
Answer:

12.Be2

Carlsen didn't spend much time on playing the most natural move. A natural move always feels good, so this was the best practical solution. Even though 12.Bxc5 was possible, after 12...Bxf3 13.gxf3 Rc8 we would arrive at a complex position where Grischuk was better prepared. White has no clear way to gain an advantage after playing 14.Bb4 or 14.Bd4.

12...Nd7 13.0-0

The positive side of Black's idea, the quick ...b5, is seen after 13.c4. Then 13...b4 is possible, and although White has gained space, Black has his trump cards, too, such as the advance of his queenside pawn majority.



13...Bxf3?!

Played after thinking for 12 minutes, this move was a pleasant surprise for Carlsen. He considered it "Very risky, strategically speaking."

Question: It looks dubious even to me. What was its justification?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: "Clearly the point is that he wants to play ...c4 without allowing Nd4," said Carlsen.

Grischuk said after the game that 11...b5 was old preparation. He remembered that the computers back then said Black was better, so he was repeating the moves suggested by the computer.

Modern engines prefer the more natural 13...Rac8 here.

14.Bxf3

Nielsen and Svidler mentioned the possibility of 14.gxf3 followed by 15.f4, trying to limit the activity of the g7-bishop without discarding the advance h4. It seems that Carlsen would hardly double his pawns unless there was a clear reason. If the healthy recapture is good, why weaken the pawn structure?

14...c4

Exercise: Now there are several choices. What plan and move do you think Carlsen chose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15.Be2

Carlsen goes for setting up a strong centre and prepares f4. He also considered 15.h4, the AlphaZero trademark move. This is the preferred option of the engines at the beginning of 2020, too. In that case Black would probably prepare...Nc5 with 15...Qc7.

15...Rfd8?!

Question: Why is it dubious to centralise the rook with an X-ray along the d-file between the rook and the queen?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The idea is ambitious. Black wants to deploy his rooks on d8 and c8, but we must consider the tactical elements, too. Leaving the rook on a8 converts it into a tactical weakness, as we shall see.

Strategically, this move was maybe also questionable, because the f8-rook leaves the kingside, where White is clearly advancing. White plans to play f4 and e5 and Black should not give up the chance to react with an opportune ...f6.

The improvements suggested were 15...Qa3, preparing ...Nc5, or 15...Rad8 first, with ...Nb6 as an alternative if White plays f4 and e5. An example can be seen in the line 15...Rad8 16.f4 Qa3 17.Bf3 Nc5 18.e5, where, before White consolidates his central position, Black has the counterattack 18...f6! (if 19.d6 then 19...e6! is good).

16.f4

Carlsen continues with his idea.

16...Nb6

We mentioned a tactical weakness, the a8-rook, that is seen after 16...Qa3 17.Bf3 Nc5 18.e5 f6?. Here White has 19.d6! hitting the rook, and after 19...Rac8 20.Bd5+ e6 there are several winning moves, of which the simplest is 21.Bxe6+! Nxe6 22.Qd5! Black could try other defences but it is now clear that 15...Rfd8 wasn't right.

With his move Black stops the advance e5.

In any case, the move which Black played here may also be inaccurate. He could have played 16...Rac8, getting rid of the main defect of his position and preparing ...Nc5, without fearing 17.e5 due to 17...Nb6.

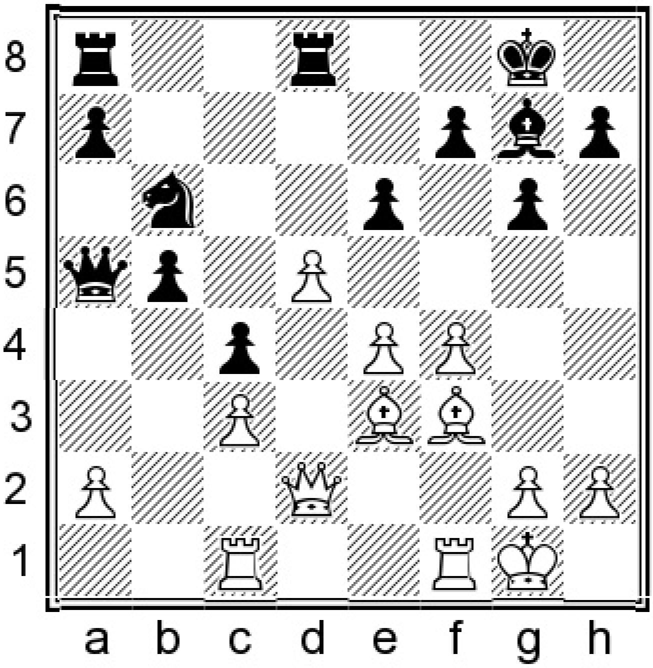
17.Bf3

Played according to the plan. The engines like 17.f5, which allows 17...Nd7 and then ...Ne5, but they consider the space advantage to be more important after 18.g4, or even after opening files playing 18.fxg6 followed by h4. They prefer White after both possibilities.

However, that is a "computer move", difficult to play at the board as there is a promising alternative. Carlsen would hardly have considered it seriously.

17...Qa3

Question: Why does Black not take advantage of the X-rays on the d-file by playing 17...e6?



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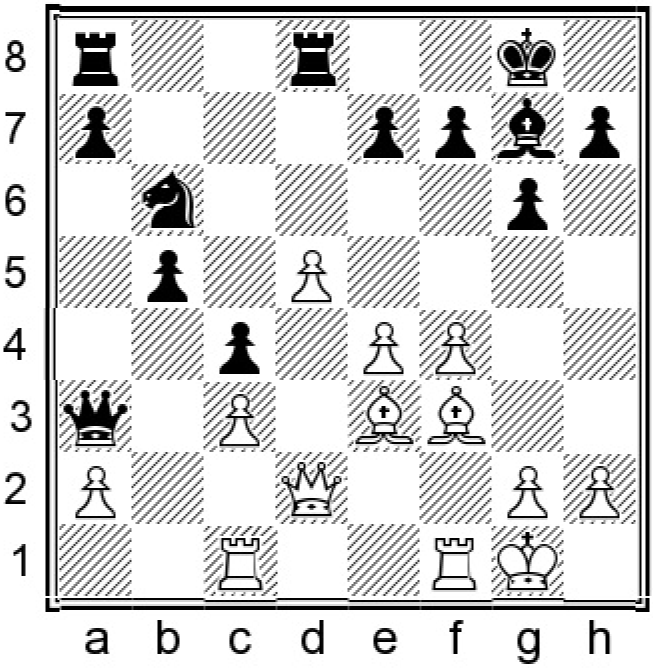
Answer: This move was possible. White could answer 18.d6, to which Black would reply 18...e5, but the main problem is that White can simply ignore it with a useful move like 18.Qf2!. After 18...exd5 19.e5!, followed by 20.Bd4, the f5 break is coming, and Black's castled position will suffer a strong attack. Black's extra pawn on d5 only hampers his own play.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.h4!

Carlsen really likes this move against the fianchetto. In the post mortem between the players, Grischuk said he was already lost after this move, though Carlsen called that an exaggeration.

Black's position is difficult to hold in practice, although there are no immediate decisive threats. White advances slowly but without pausing, and without fearing Black's smaller threats on the other side of the board.

Question: Did Carlsen evaluate 18.e5, gaining more space with his strong center?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, Carlsen looked at 18.e5, but he was not attracted at all. He explained he should then have to calculate the captures on d5, and after 18...Rab8 19.Bxb6 Rxb6, although 20.Qd4 "looks nice," the scenario was not what he wanted. He rejected 18.e5 because "I can no longer win with a direct attack, and that's what I want."

At the same time, he had no doubts about 18.h4: “It just looks so nice,” he said after the game.

18...e6

Svidler considered that Grischuk’s only chance was 18...b4, aiming at immediately distracting White from his offensive. However, that was not quick enough. White could just ignore the queenside and continue with his own attack: 19.h5! Bxc3 20.Qf2, with ideas like 21.hxg6 hxg6 22.f5, among others.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19.h5!

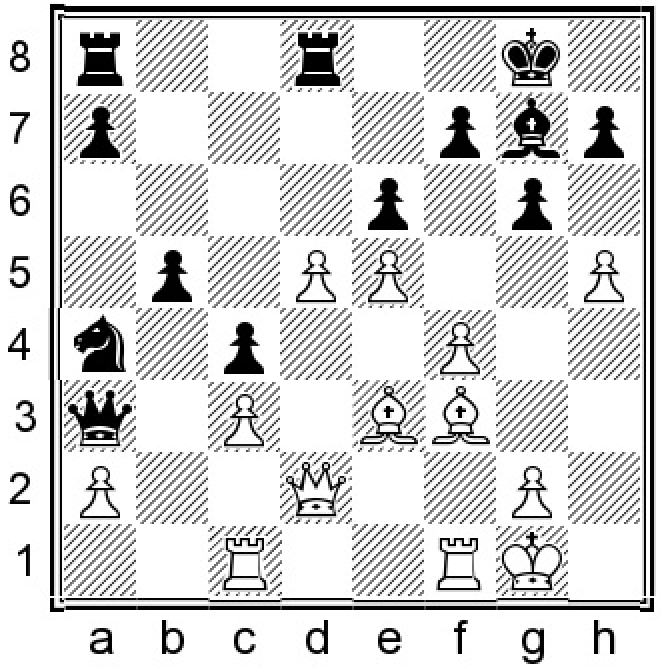
We have already seen that 19...exd5 is not good due to 20.e5!, followed by Bd4, f5, etc. Black’s position is very difficult to hold.

19...Na4

Another piece moves further away from the kingside to inject more power to his offensive, trying to focus the fight not on the kingside but on “Black’s” flank. This offensive will not work, however, even after 19...b4, White can continue ignoring the queenside, opening lines of attack on the kingside with 20.hxg6 hxg6, then 21.Qf2 with a ferocious attack: the moves f5, Bd4 and Bg4 suggest themselves, and Black has no defence.

20.hxg6

Question: Isn’t it better to maintain the tension without ruling out the chance to play h6? Why not try 20.e5? The b6-knight is gone, after all.



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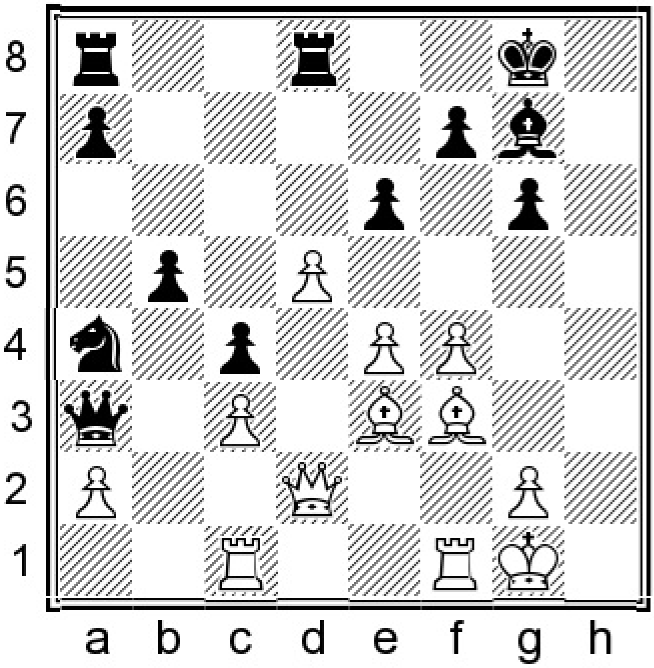
Answer: To maintain the tension is generally a good decision, but in this case Carlsen considered that the moment for taking concrete measures had arrived. Opening lines accelerates the attack. The g6-pawn is much weaker now and the h-file will give strength to the offensive, as we shall see.

The move you suggested, 20.e5, was a good one, but it gives Black more practical chances after 20...Rxd5!? 21.Bxd5 Rd8. The knight can get to d3 via b2 and, although White is better, Carlsen prioritises attack over gaining a material advantage.

20...hxg6



Exercise: What was Carlsen's idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21.f5!

Trying to open more lines of attack. The sequence of moves Carlsen chose is the same that the engines prefer.

21...exf5

If 21...Nxc3 then 22.fxe6 fxe6 23.Bg4. This manoeuvre is present in several positions.

After the critical 21...Bxc3 White can simply play 22.Qf2, and Black's position remains difficult. There is something even better, though: White can eliminate the only defender of the opponent's king by playing 22.Rxc3!, and after 22...Qxc3 23.Qf2 White threatens 24.Bd4. if 23...Qg7 we see our familiar manoeuvre 24.fxe6 fxe6 25.Bg4!, while after 23...Qb2 24.Qg3 Qc3 White has the quiet 25.Bf2!, controlling c5, and the black kingside falls apart, as Svidler pointed out.

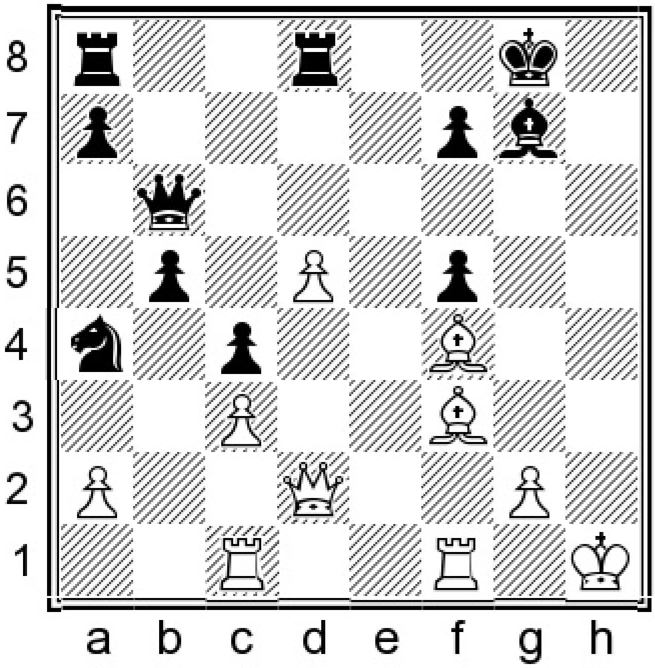
22.exf5 Qd6 23.Bf4

The engines prefer 23.fxg6, because after 23...Qxg6 there is a hidden but very strong move 24.Bd1!, followed by Bc2. What Carlsen chose is more "human", and also effective, as we shall see.

23...Qb6+

Exchanging the bishop by playing 23...Be5 doesn’t inspire confidence, and getting rid of this defender is no relief. Indeed, after 24.Bxe5 Qxe5 25.fxg6 fxg6 26.Rce1 black’s castled position is untenable.

24.Kh1 gxf5



Exercise (simple): What was the idea of 23.Bf4?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25.d6!

It was preparation of the advance of the central passed pawn. It will not be enough in itself to win, but it allows White to gain more space and prepares a new attacking wave, which is unstoppable.

25...Rab8

Exercise (simple): And now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Bd5

Increasing the pressure along the f-file, and the position is very easy to play.

26...Nc5 27.Bg3

The f-file is completely cleared.

27...Ne6

If 27...Ne4 28.Bxe4 fxe4 White wins playing 29.Rxf7!. After 29...Kxf7 30.Qd5+ there is forced mate in 18 moves(!) according to the engines. Let's continue a little. After 30...Kg6 31.Qxe4+ Kf7 32.Rf1+ Kg8 33.Qe6+ Kh7 the move 34.Rf5! is decisive.

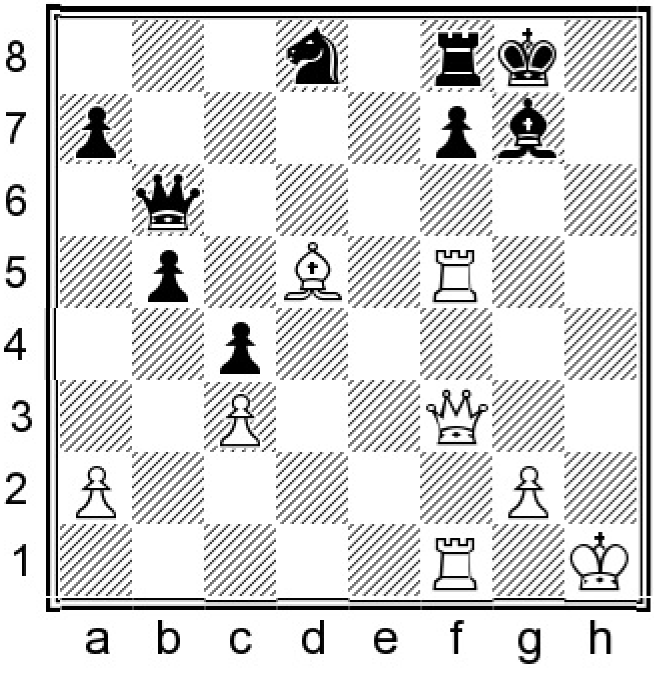
28.Rxf5

White threatens 29.Rxf7, or simply 29.Rcf1.

28...Rxd6 29.Bxd6 Qxd6 30.Qe3

The exchange sacrifice hasn't granted Black much relief, as White's attack is still winning. White plans 30.Rcf1.

30...Qb6 31.Qf3 Rf8 32.Rf1 Nd8



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

33.Rh5

The open h-file gives White the final word.

33...Qc7 34.Qe4

Mate on h7 is unavoidable

1–0

This game was highly praised by Peter Svidler, an expert in the Grunfeld Defence.

In the recap of the game, Carlsen said “He clearly misplaced his pieces,” and added “In the end, his pieces are all on the queenside and my attack is just too strong.”

Carlsen enjoyed the attack with all his pieces, which combined with Grischuk’s time trouble was unstoppable.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) A king without enough defenders and several pieces on the other flank without creating strong counterplay generally leads to disaster for the king if the attack is played accurately.

2.) If you have two similar continuations, imitate Carlsen who chooses the principled option. (14.Bxf3! *14.gxf3?!*)

3.) In many positions it is not enough to have a good idea. It is also necessary to evaluate the tactical elements before deciding on the arrangement of your pieces. (15...Rfd8? *15...Rad8!*)

4.) Don’t forget the practical element. *18...b4!* to try to resist, or 20.hxg6! *20.e5* to accelerate the offensive.

5.) The methodical and relentless execution showed by Carlsen during his attack, opening the h- and f-files, is admirable. (18.h4! 19.h5! 21.f5! 25.d6! 26.Bd5! 27.Bg3! 33.Rh5!)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 30

Magnus Carlsen – Maxim Vachier-Lagrave

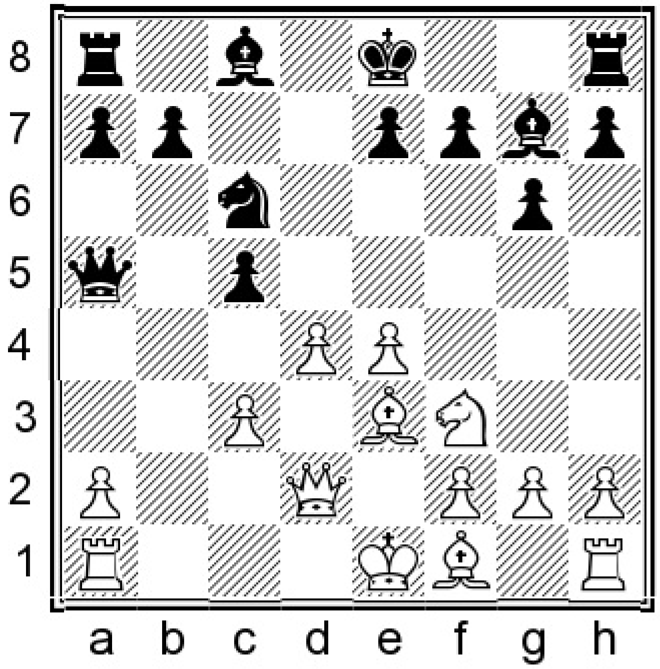
Grunfeld Defence [D85]

Croatia GCT, Zagreb (11), 07.07.2019

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.cxd5 Nxd5 6.e4 Nxc3 7.bxc3 c5 8.Be3 Qa5

Vachier-Lagrave, who has played this line with White too, had chosen 8...Bg4 before. Indeed, he used to prefer this move, which is the more popular reply.

9.Qd2 Nc6



10.Rb1

10.Rc1 was the more popular move. The rook moves away from the threat from the g7-bishop and defends c3 with the idea of 11.d5.

This intermediate move played, threatening Rb5 appeared once the more natural 10.Rc1 stopped looking promising after the simplification 10...cxd4 11.cxd4 Qxd2+ 12.Kxd2 0-0 13.d5 Rd8 was found.

10...cxd4

Question: What's wrong with 10...a6?

Show/Hide Solution

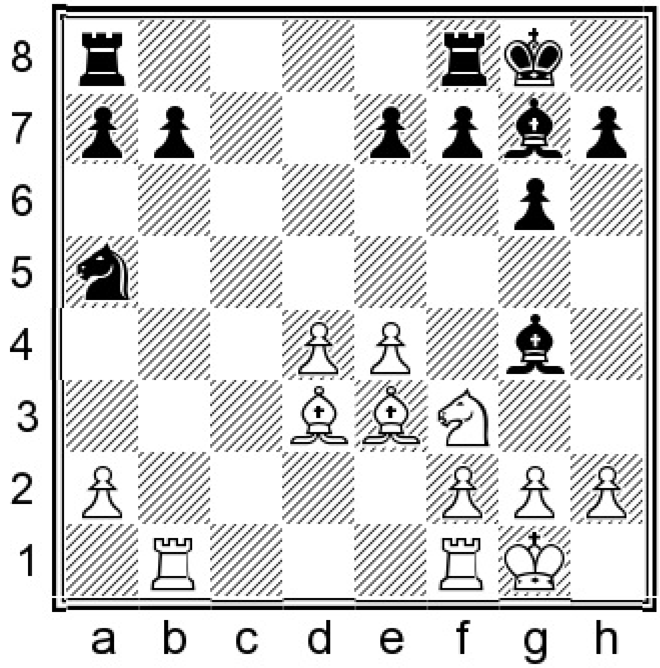
Answer: There is nothing wrong with it, and it is actually one of the main lines. Nonetheless, it justifies White's idea: Black's queenside is weakened, especially the b6 square. Black cannot safely play...b6: this weakness is seen in the line we mentioned and Black must be constantly aware of the pending Bb6, for example 10...a6 11.Rc1 cxd4 12.cxd4 Qxd2+ 13.Kxd2 0-0 14.d5 Rd8 15.Bb6.

Black has several alternative plans, including the counterattack ...f5, or simply ...e6. Indeed, 13...e6 in this line was later played by Vachier-Lagrave against Flom, in Gibraltar 2020. The game ended in a draw.

11.cxd4 0-0 12.Qxa5 Nxa5 13.Bd3 Bg4

A different idea is 13...Rd8 and then ...b6, with the idea of putting the c8-bishop on b7. 13...Bg4 is what the engines liked at the beginning of 2020.

14.0-0



14...Bxf3?

MVL had played very rapidly till now, but he thought for a while before playing this surprising exchange.

It seems he had to play one of the alternatives 14...Rfd8 or 14...b6.

Question: Is doubling his opponent's pawns bad? Black exchanges a piece with a questionable future, eliminating a defender of d4. Surely that's why he played ...Bg4 in the first place?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen was pleased to see this exchange. He said it is "extremely risky": to change the structure you need a clear plan or it can be a dangerous decision.

In the next part of the game Black failed to offer serious resistance to the bishop pair and White's threat to create a passed pawn with d5. The pressure on d4 was insufficient.

Question: Fine, but if the move played is clearly a mistake at such a high level, why did such a strong player as Vachier-Lagrave make it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is hard to know, he didn't explain it. Anish Giri believed MVL had mis-remembered his analysis, and something tactical failed.

The computers are so strong that general considerations may prove insufficient in the openings. It is the era of concrete variations.

Giri considered that: "In such endgames it is often a matter of half a tempo and Black must be extremely precise if he wants to equalize." In this game Black was a tempo short, as we shall see.

15.gxf3 e6

Exercise: Black prevents the advance d5. How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16.Rfd1

Not only preparing to defend the d-pawn, but also planning d5 at the right moment.

16...Rfd8 17.Bf1 b6?!

Question: I understand that this frees the poorly placed knight from defence of the b-pawn. However, I don't like this move much either, it looks too passive. Why not try 17...Rac8? The rook would occupy the only open file, pre-empting White.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, what Black played doesn't stop White's progress. However, your suggestion 17...Rac8 is not enough either. There could follow 18.d5 exd5 19.exd5, hitting a7. And after 19...b6 then 20.d6 is strong, threatening 21.d7. White can easily support his strong passed pawn.

From all this we can conclude that it was interesting to constrain White's idea by playing 17...Bf6, as after 18.d5 exd5 19.exd5 Black has 19...Be7, stopping the further advance of the passed pawn. White would still be better but it could be harder to make progress.

Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue?

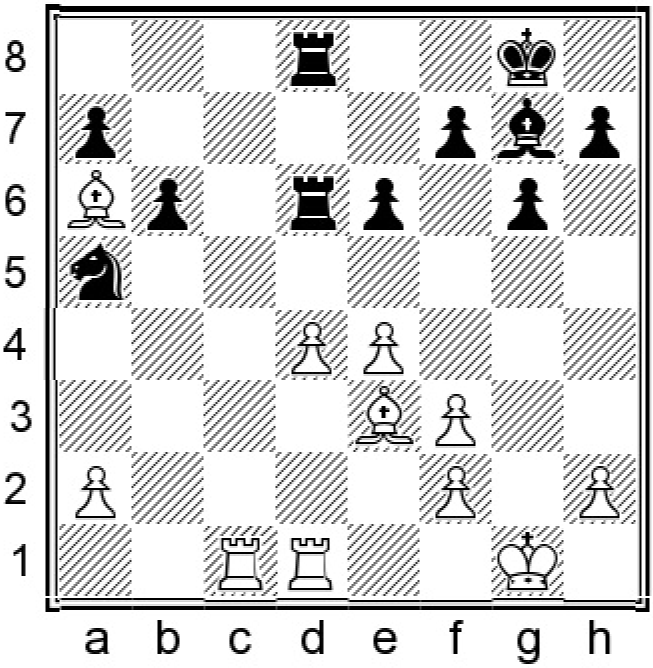
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18.Ba6

This move, controlling c8 and the c-file, suggests itself. However, curiously it is the second option for the engines after 18.Rbc1. The chosen move also prevents 18...Nc6 due to 19.Bb7

18...Rd6 19.Rbc1 Rad8



Exercise: How did Carlsen defend his central pawn?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.Bg5!

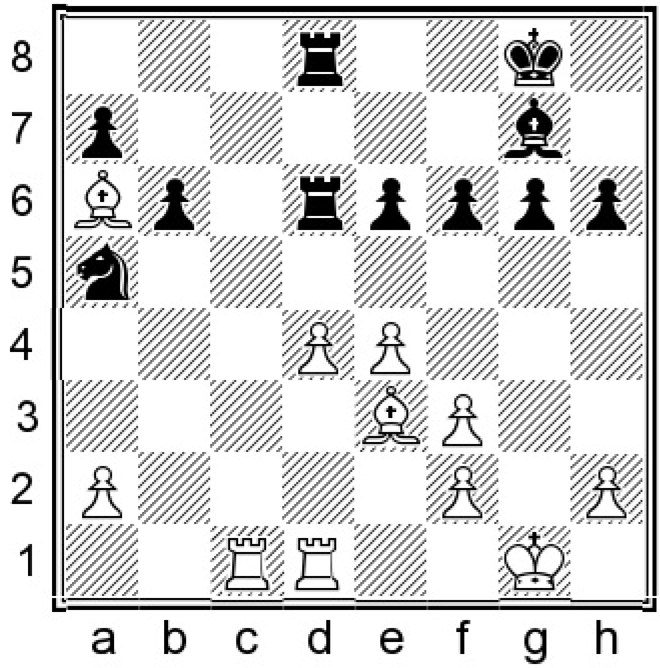
This is a typical response. Black's answer is forced, as the rook has no good square to go to. If e.g. 20...Re8 then the strong 21.d5! follows. After 21...exd5 22.Bb5 Ra8 23.exd5, the passed pawn continues advancing, supported by his rooks and bishops.

20...f6 21.Be3 h6

Controlling g5. Black wants to continue with 22...f5 without allowing 23.Bg5.

Looking at what happened in the game, it is easy to suggest 21...Nc6, which is the move Carlsen was expecting.

But in that case White may continue with his plan: the advance of the passed pawn, helped by the weakness of the a2-g8 diagonal. Let's see an example: 22.d5! exd5 23.Rxd5 Rxd5 24.exd5 Ne7, and now it is necessary to choose between 25.Bf4 and 25.Rc7 Nxd5 26.Bc4, when both lines favour White.



22.Bb5

This impedes the return of the knight to the center from c6.

The more obvious move is 22.Rc7. After 22...Nc6 then 23.d5! is possible, e.g. 23...exd5 24.Rxd5 Rxd5 25.exd5 Nb4 26.Bc4! Nxd5 27.Rxa7, with an advantage.

In response to the counterattack 22...f5 there are several good moves. The engines like the "unhuman" 23.Bc8, but the more "human" 23.Rdc1 and 23.d5 are also good.

22...f5?!

Carlsen said he thought Black should play 22...g5!, controlling f4, with the idea of playing 23...f5 only after 23.h4, and although "there is a huge advantage for White maybe Black has some drawing chances."

Exercise: How did White improve his position?

Show/Hide Solution

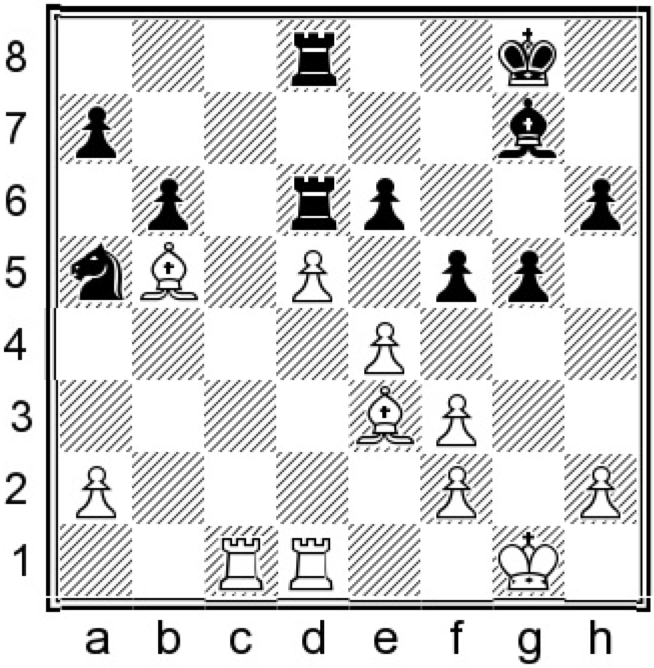
Answer:

23.d5!

White can advance his central pawn in good conditions, naturally supported by tactics.

23...g5

The necessity of controlling f4 is seen in the following line: 23...exd5 24.Bf4!, and the d-pawn becomes unstoppable. There is not much difference after 23...fxe4 24.fxe4 exd5 25.Bf4 Rf6 26.Bc7 Rdf8 27.exd5.



Exercise: And now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24.Bd2!

With the deadly threat 25.Bb4, which would follow after, for example, 24...exd5.

24...fxe4 25.fxe4 a6

Exercise: What is the more accurate answer?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Ba4!

Better than 26.Bxa6 exd5 27.Bb4, because now Black has 27...Rc6.

26...exd5 27.Bb4 Re6

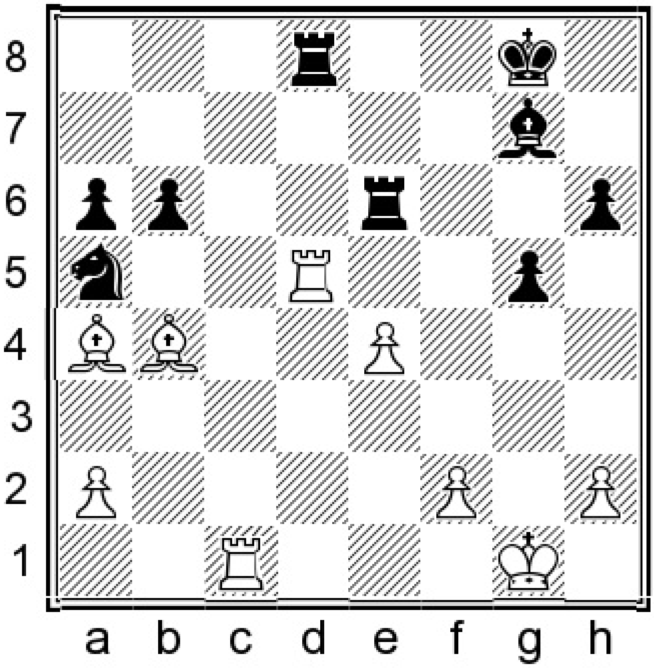
Exercise: Which is the best recapture on d5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28.Rxd5!

Much better than 28.exd5 Re4 29.a3 Nc4 30.Bb3 b5. The exchange of a pair of rooks favours White. It weakens the opponent's back rank, too.



28...Rxd5?!

Running away with 28...Rb8 would have been very sad, and White has several choices. It is possible to maintain the pressure by playing 29.Bd6 Ra8 30.e5 or to sharpen the position with a pawn sacrifice, playing 30.Rc7 Rxe4 31.Bc2. Another option is 29.Bxa5 bxa5 30.Rc4, which most probably leads to the win of a pawn. Black would still retain hopes because of the bishops of opposite colours, but it would be just about torture to defend the position. Black's desire to avoid these lines is understandable, but it makes life easier for White.

29.exd5 Re4

Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

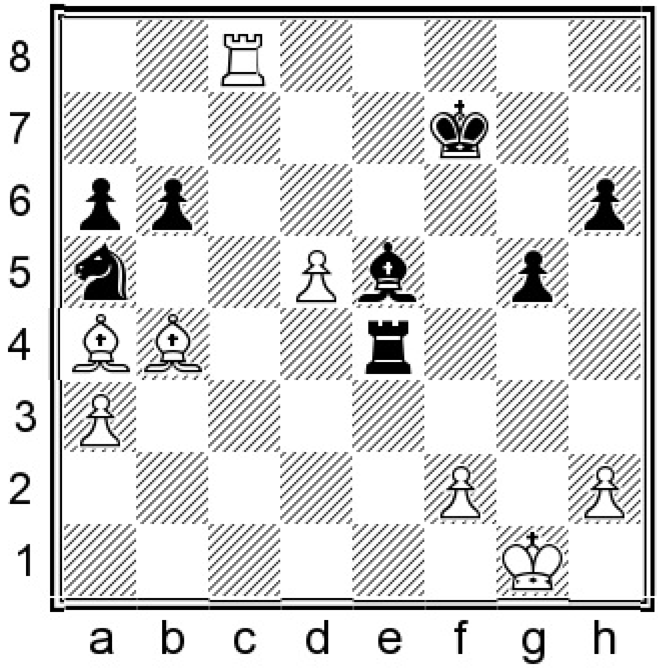
30.Rc8+!

This is what White was looking for after the exchange of rooks. Now 30...Kh7 fails to 31.Bc2, so the king must move to f7, which favours White, as we shall see.

30...Kf7 31.a3

Threatening 32.d6.

31...Be5



Exercise (simple): What should he play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32.Be8+!

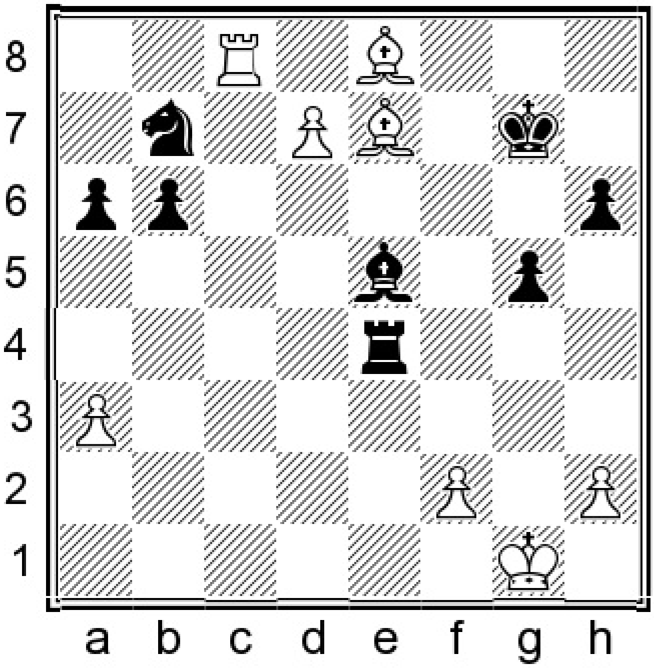
And White succeeds in advancing his passed pawn thanks to a tactic. Of course not the immediate 32.d6? due to 32...Bxd6.

32...Kg7 33.d6

This is even better than the also strong line 33.Bf8+ Kh7 (33...Kxf8 34.Bg6+) 34.d6.

33...Rd4 34.d7 Nb7 35.Be7 Re4

If 35...Bf6 then 36.Bxf6+ Kxf6 37.Rb8.



Exercise: Black is helpless. There are several wining moves, but which is the quickest?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

36.Rc6!

Threatening 37.Rxb6. This is stronger than the immediate 36.d8=Q Nxd8 37.Bxd8 Bxh2+ 38.Kxh2 Rxe8, prolonging the agony.

36...Bd4 37.Rc7!

And now queening is unavoidable.

1–0

Surprisingly, a major expert in the Grunfeld Defence made a questionable exchange just out of the opening, one which was “extremely risky” in the words of the World Champion. That decision needed a clear plan to justify it, and Black couldn’t find one. Carlsen said he wasn’t sure if he played the best continuation in the game (although there seems to be nothing to criticize) but he added it was always very unpleasant for Black, as White could play for a win with completely no risk. The slow but constant progress demonstrated by Carlsen with his central majority paints a beautiful picture.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It is important to know the right answers to “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” No less important is to exchange at the right time. (14...Bxf3? 28.Rxd5!)

2.) Knowing the typical tactical ideas in your chosen opening is essential. (20.Bg5!)

3.) When fighting against a strong center it is crucial to obstruct its consolidation, in order to prevent it from advancing powerfully and safely. (*14...b6! 14...*R*fd8!*)

4.) The great Emanuel Lasker wrote: “Any position, however bad it looks, contains defensive resources.” (*22...g5!*)

5.) To convert an advantage, it’s necessary to make use of tactics and be aware of the chances that your opponent has. (23.d5! 24.Bd2! 30.Rc8+! 32.Be8+! *32.d6?*)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 31
Magnus Carlsen – Wesley So

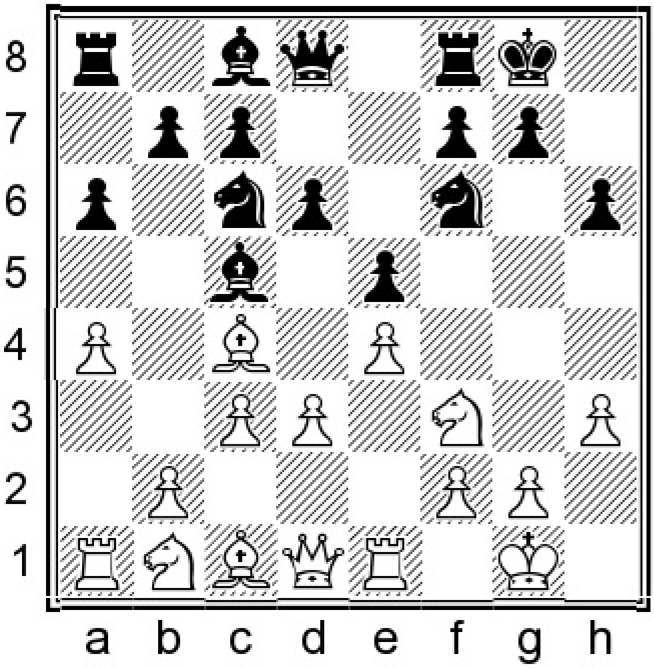
Italian Opening [C50]

Sinquefield Cup, Saint Louis (10), 27.08.2019

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3 0-0 6.c3 d6 7.h3 h6

In the second round of the tournament, against Vachier-Lagrave, So preferred 7...a6 8.a4 Ba7 9.Re1, and now tried a plan Aronian likes very much in similar positions: 9...Kh8 with the idea of ...Ng8 and ...f5. In our game he chose a more usual line.

8.Re1 a6 9.a4



9...a5

Question: He plays ...a5 in two moves? Why?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Nielsen explained that the typical idea of this line, 9...Be6, is answered by 10.Bxe6 fxe6, and here the expansion 11.b4 Ba7 12.Nbd2 leads to trouble for Black, such as in the game Anand – Carlsen from Stavanger 2017. The reasons to avoid this by Black are: “The space itself obviously, but also because a rook on a2 will defend the f2–pawn eventually” (Nielsen). Hence if Black wants to play ...Be6 it is better to stop that expansion. This idea was also played by Alexander Grischuk.

Question: Isn’t it better to play 8...a5, winning a tempo?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That is possible too, and has been played by among others Ding Liren, who by the way won this tournament in the tie-break against Carlsen. However, it is not clear that this would be “winning a tempo”. The position is different, as the white a-pawn would be on a2 in that case, and as Nielsen also commented “White potentially has the option of a3 and b4, whereas now the b4–square is definitely under Black’s control.”

10.Nbd2

Question: Why doesn’t White use his chance to play 10.d4?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That is also a normal move, but the overwhelming majority prefer to delay the central advance, because it costs time to deploy the pieces in good positions to support it, such as Bb3 and then Bc2. For example, 10.d4 Bb6 11.Be3, planning Nbd2, allows 11...exd4 12.cxd4 d5 with a good position, Aronian – Anand, Saint Louis 2019.

10...Be6

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

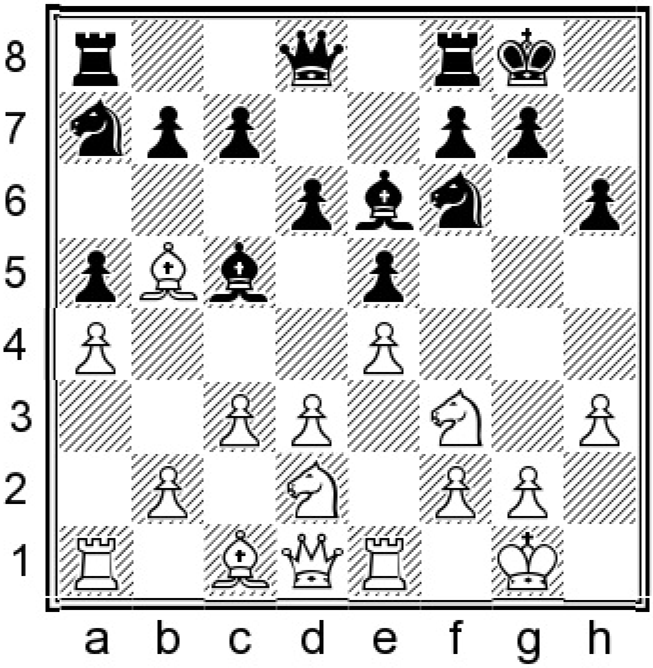
Answer:

11.Bb5

Now 11.Bxe6, even if it was playable, would justify Black’s idea of playing ...a5 in two moves, as there is no b4 for white.

It is hard to say if the move chosen is objectively better, but in practice it is more annoying.

11...Na7



Exercise: This demonstrates the drawback of 11.Bb5: the bishop has only c4 as a retreat. What did Carlsen answer?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12.d4

Taking advantage of the knight's absence to occupy the center. The following sequence is forced, as White threatens to withdraw his bishop from b5.

12...Nxb5 13.dxc5

More ambitious than 13.axb5 exd4 14.Nxd4 Re8, and Black has no problems, Giri – Anand, Wijk aan Zee 2019.

13...Na7

Exercise: How did Carlsen arrange his pieces? What did he play now?

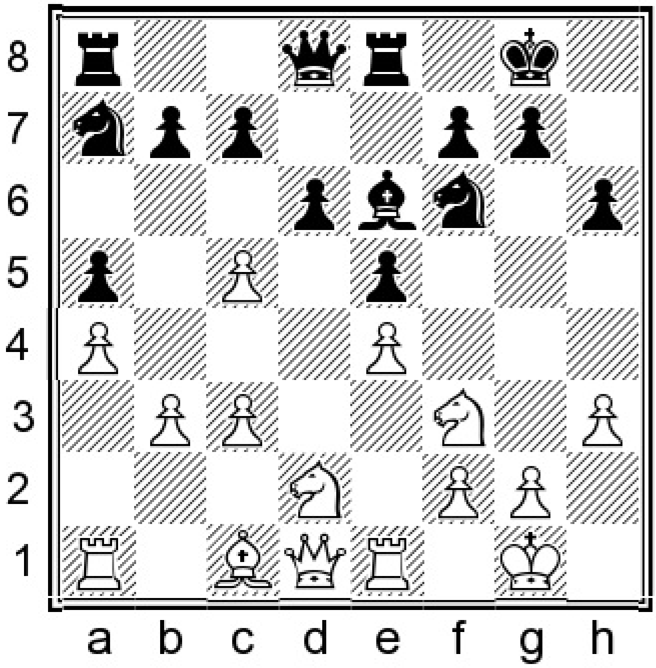
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.b3!

The c1-bishop has a better future on the a3-f8 diagonal than on c1-h6, and besides, Nc4 is now possible.

14...Re8

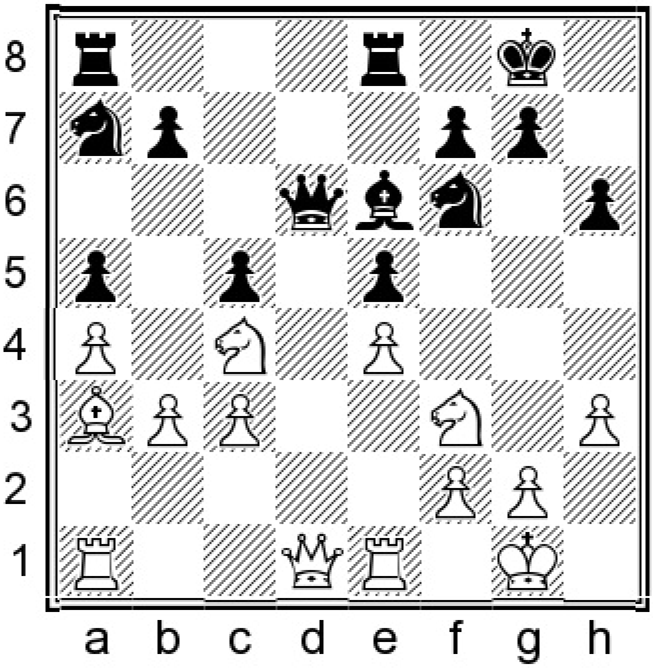


Question: What an odd move. What’s the rook doing there?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It would be more logical to return the knight to c6, but 14...Nc6 is met by 15.cxd6, then 15...Qxd6? loses to 16.Ba3, while 15...cxd6 16.Ba3 Re8 17.c4 leaves a weakness on d6 with no compensation. Therefore, 14...Re8 is necessary in order to take back on d6 with the queen.

15.cxd6 Qxd6 16.Ba3 c5 17.Nc4

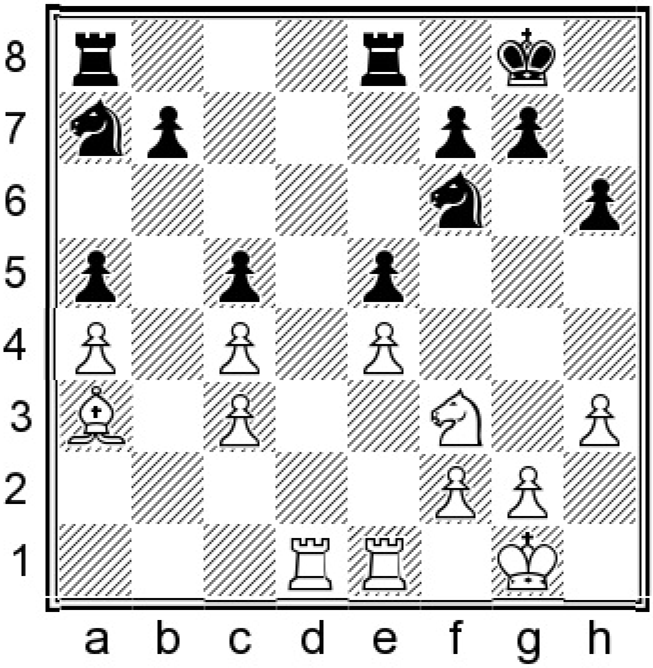


Question: Allowing doubled pawns? I can’t believe this is the best option.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Was the principal alternative 17.Qe2 any better? Carlsen said that he wasn’t sure about 17.Qe2 so he went for the ending, which he considered drawish but still with chances to fight for a win despite the exchange of queens.

17...Qxd1 18.Raxd1 Bxc4 19.bxc4



Carlsen commented during the Russian broadcast after the game that he was paying a kind of homage to Mikhail Botvinnik, who in several games successfully played this same structure with doubled pawns in the Nimzo-Indian Defence.

19...b6

Black chooses the most solid and “human” protection of c5. The engines prefer to protect the b-pawn with 19...Rac8 followed by ...Rc7, then the regrouping plan ...Nc8–b6, attacking White’s weak c4–pawn.

After for example 20.Nd2 (or 20.Nh2, with the same idea, trying to reach d5) 20...Rc7 21.Nf1 Nc8 22.Ne3 Nb6, the position is complex, and chances are similar after 23.Rb1 Nxa4 24.Nd5, although there are many more possibilities. This shows Carlsen was right in his decision to head for the ending: there is life in the position and chances for both sides to play for a win.

Exercise: How did White continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

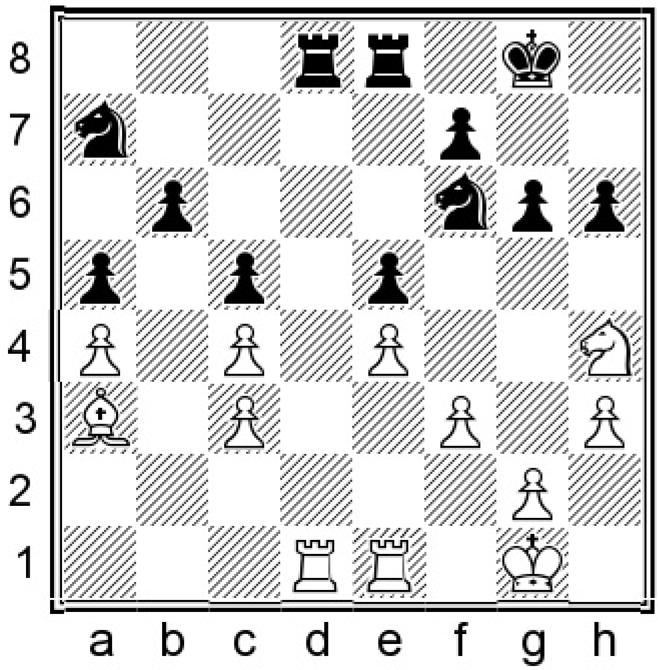
20.Nh4

Initiating the long trip to d5. This way is more active than from h2, and it doesn’t occupy the d-file as would happen from d2.

20...Rad8 21.f3

This is necessary defence of the e-pawn.

21...g6



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22.g3

Vacating g2 for the knight.

The alternative was 22.g4, intending the same knight regrouping as in the game, while at the same time stopping Black's next move. However, as Nielsen commented, "Magnus wanted to keep his own kingside structure as flexible as possible."

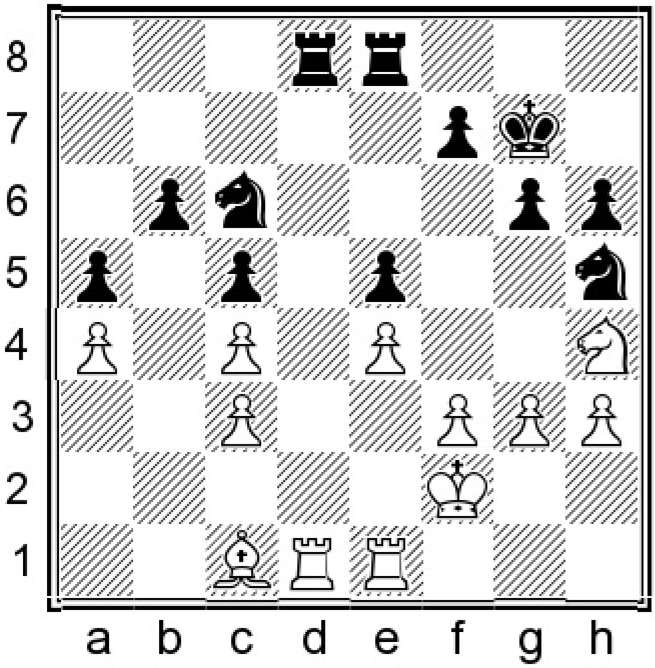
22...Nh5 23.Kf2 Nc6?!

Question: Dubious? I can't see a move more natural than this one.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is a natural move. Wesley So trusts in the solidity of his position and continues playing natural moves. However, we shall see that just waiting is not the best strategy. It would have been more effective to try and get active play with the manoeuvre 23...Nc8! followed by 24...Nd6, preparing the counterattack ...f5.

24.Bc1 Kg7



25.Be3

Question: The bishop moves to e3? What is it doing there?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It’s not the ideal square, true, but the bishop will soon find a better place, giving space to the knight. This move is necessary, as we shall see.

25...Rxd1

Still with the same idea, looking for equality in the safest way, which is simplifying.

25...Ne7 was more active. The knight heads to c8 and d6, planning ...f5. After 25...Ne7 26.Ng2 the immediate 26...f5 is possible, although there was still a fight after 27.g4 Nf6 28.exf5 gxf5 29.g5.

26.Rxd1 Rd8

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

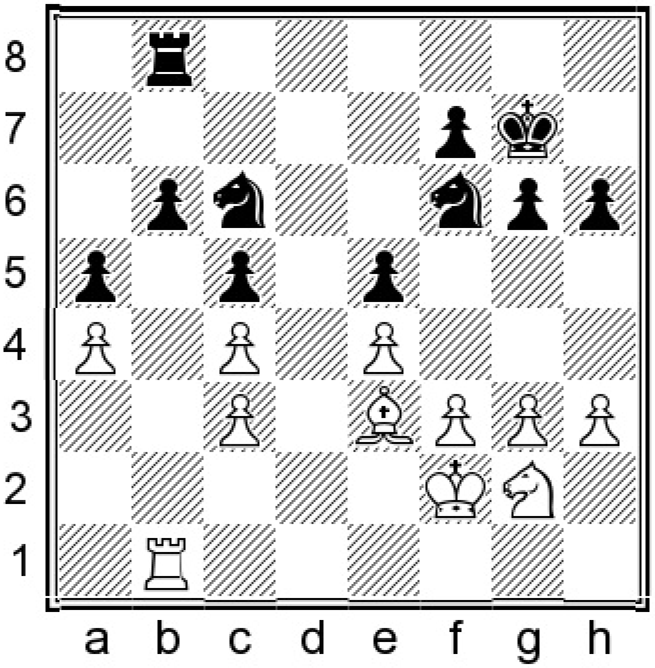
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.Rb1!

Keeping a pair of rooks is essential for White. This is why Carlsen played 25.Be3, clearing the first rank.

27...Rb8 28.Ng2 Nf6



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen reorganize his forces?

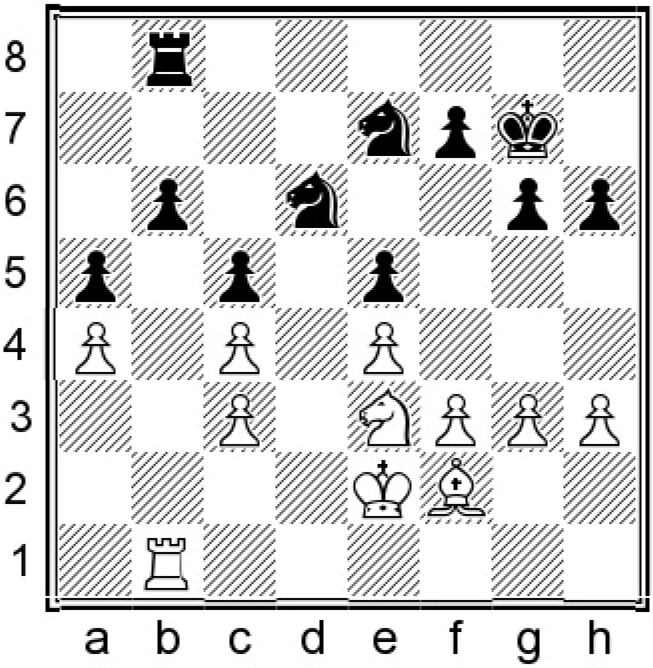
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29.Ke2

Preparing the retreat of his bishop.

29...Ne8 30.Bf2 Nd6 31.Ne3 Ne7?!



Black believes in the impregnability of his position, but this is inaccurate.

Exercise: How did Carlsen punish So’s mistake?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32.Nd5!

Forcing the exchange of knights. The pawn structure changes, and greatly in White’s favour, as we shall soon see. Carlsen now considered his position to be winning.

32...Nxd5 33.cxd5 Rb7 34.Kd3

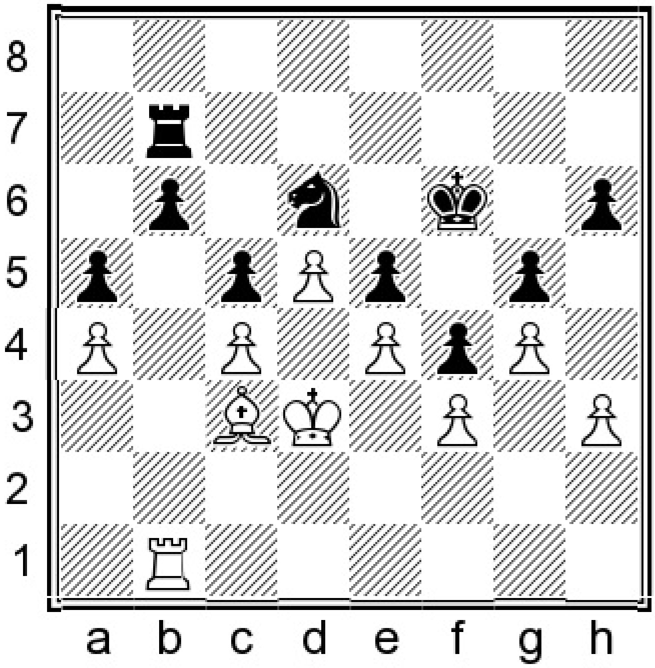
34.c4 is also possible, immediately opening the long dark diagonal.

34...f5

Trying to get some counterplay, at the price of creating a new weakness, the e-pawn. However, there is no big difference: if Black continues waiting White will play f4 later.

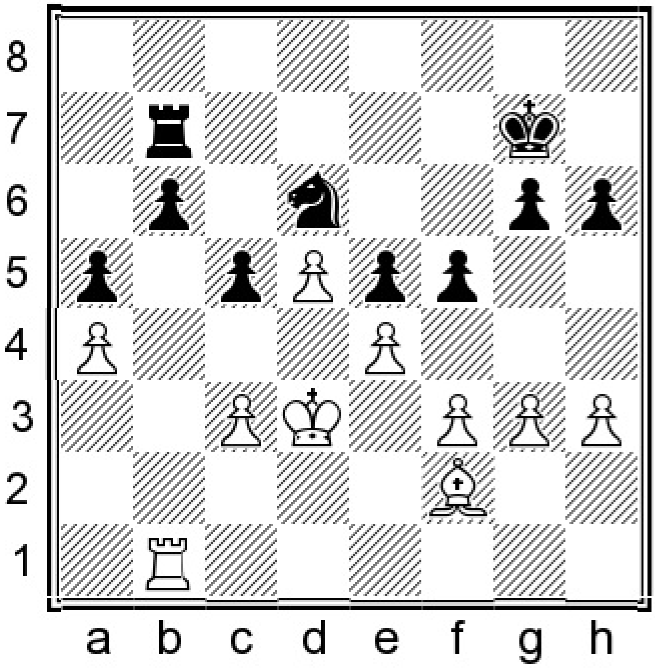
Black didn’t take the chance to play 34...c4+, anyway. After 35.Kd2 Nc8 then 36.Bc5, preventing 36...Nd6, is very strong (the immediate 36.f4 is also possible). It would be followed later by f4, opening up the kingside, and Black’s position would collapse rather soon, e.g. 36...Rd7 37.Ba3 f5 38.Ke3 Kf6 39.f4, and Black’s position is ruined,

After the game Carlsen showed a fun line: 34...f6 35.c4 g5 36.Be1, with the idea of Bc3 and f4. Black could try to defend playing 36...f5 37.Bc3 Kf6 38.g4 f4



Now White simply plays 39.Rb2 and Black is in zugzwang: the rook needs to be on the b-file to protect the b-pawn, but if it moves to b8, it allows 40.Bxa5. The knight on d6 is needed there to protect the rook on b7, or else Bxa5 is again possible, and finally, the king is stuck on f6 protecting e5.

Let’s go back to the game.



35.c4 fxe4+

If Black continues waiting with 35...Kf6 then White wins with the same regrouping: 36.Be1 (or starting with 36.g4) 36...g5 37.Bc3 f4 38.g4, reaching the same zugzwang.

36.fxe4 Rf7

Exercise: Carlsen played the strongest move now, which one?

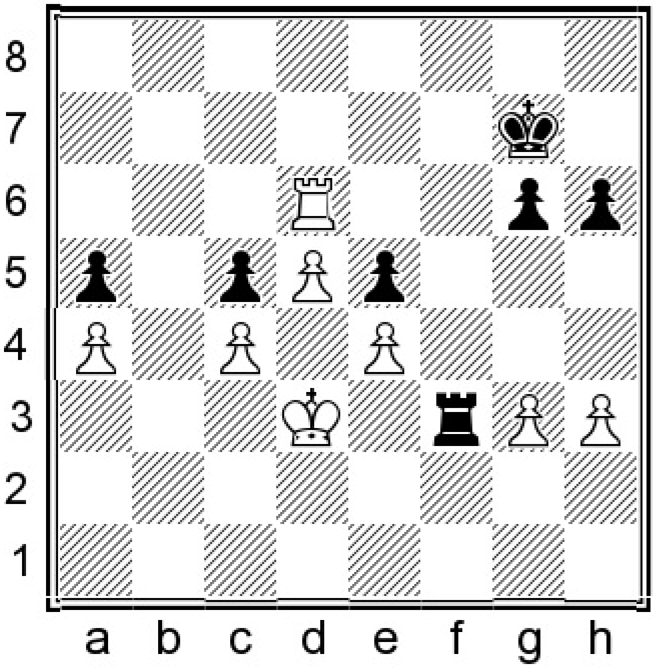
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37.Rxb6!

The rook ending is won, but 37.Be3? Rf3! forces White to play 38.Rg1 and his advantage disappears. 38.Rxb6?? is impossible due to 38...Rxe3+!

37...Rxf2 38.Rxd6 Rf3+



Exercise: White is winning. Which is the most precise retreat?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39.Ke2?!

"I was a bit ashamed of my play in the ending, because I allowed 39...Rc3, which is just insane, but he collapsed immediately" (Carlsen).

39.Kd2! was much more precise: if 39...Rxg3 then 40.Rc6 wins easily, or 39...Rf2+ 40.Ke3 Rc2

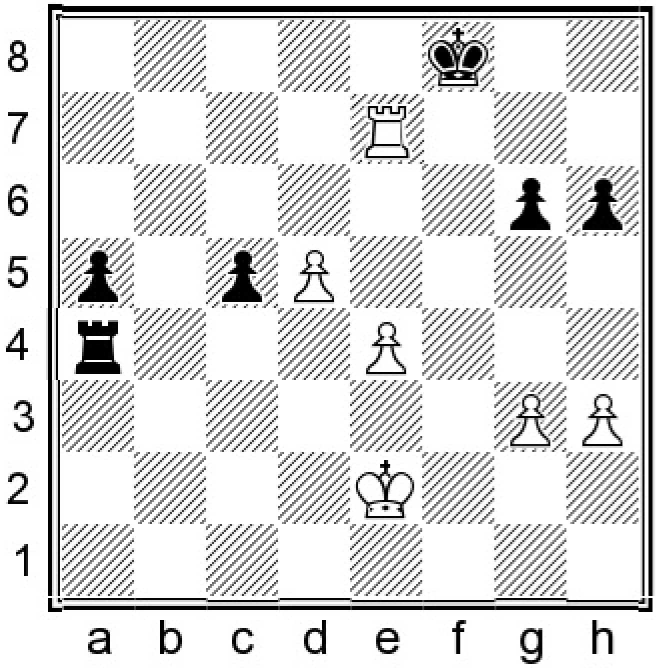
41.Kd3 and Rc6.

39...Rc3

39...Rxg3 was not forced. It would have lost easily, again, to 40.Rc6.

40.Re6 Rxc4 41.Rxe5 Rxa4 42.Re7+ Kf6?

Black had 42...Kf8!, which would have obliged Carlsen to find the winning path. It exists, and Carlsen would surely have found it, but with much more work.



Exercise: Which is the right way to play in this case?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Now 43.d6? is not possible due to 43...Rd4 "and it is a draw" (Carlsen). There is no progress after 44.e5 Rd5!, as White cannot successfully advance his connected passed pawns. 45.Ke3 a4, keeping the pawn on c5 to be ready to meet 46.Ke4 with 46...Rd4+, and the king is forced back, then Black returns the rook to d5, again attacking the e5 pawn, and it is a draw.

Carlsen said he was going to play 43.Re6!, which is the only winning move. 43...Rb4 (if 43...Kf7 then 44.Kf3 follows, improving the position via f4 and e5. Carlsen at the board was not so sure whether this was winning for White, but it is) 44.Kf3!. After 44...a4 45.Rxg6 a3 46.Ra6 Rb3+, the correct move is 47.Kg4!, instead of moving to f4. Then White wins after 47...c4 48.d6 c3 49.Ra8+ Kf7 50.d7 c2 51.d8=Q, mating the black king, because now if 51...c1=Q, Black queens without check with the king on g4 instead of f4.

43.d6

1–0

Carlsen decided very earlier to head for an endgame with doubled pawns and three isolated pawns, but this was not without basis. His idea was backed up by the classical games Botvinnik – Chekhover, Leningrad 1938 and Botvinnik – Kan, Leningrad 1939, among others, where White took advantage of control of d5 and other central squares, too.

“The ending should be holdable for Black, but it is not a forced draw, which was encouraging for me,” commented Carlsen, who won via gradual progress.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) “How can I improve the position of my pieces?” This question, posed at the right moment, can give us clues to finding the best move. (14.b3! 14...Re8! *19...*R*ac8! 23...*N*c8!*)

2.) “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” If you can find the right answers, you’ll probably discover the correct plan. (25.Be3! 32.Nd5!)

3.) Knowing the classics is always useful. (17.Nc4!)

4.) Never underestimate the opponent’s defensive resources, even in difficult situations. (*37.*B*e3?* 37.Rxb6! 39.Ke2?)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 32

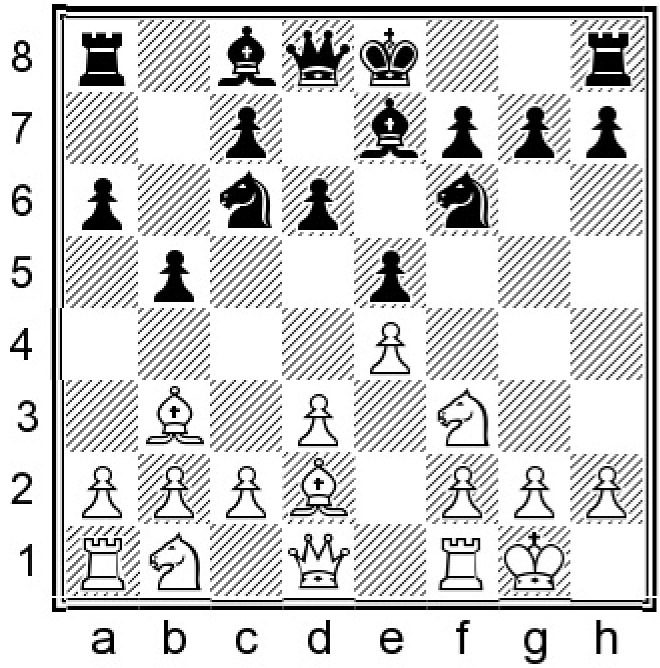
Magnus Carlsen – Nikita Vitiugov

Ruy Lopez [C84]

Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee (8), 19.01.2020

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.0-0 Be7 6.d3 b5 7.Bb3 d6

8.Bd2



Question: What a strange move. The bishop occupies the place of the b1-knight, what is the explanation?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This is a relatively new idea. It may look odd at first sight, but the main reason is obviously to stop 8...Na5, exchanging the valuable “Spanish bishop”. This plan is also possible with other more popular moves such as 8.a3 or 8.c3, but the chosen move avoids the plan 8...Na5 followed by ...c5.

8...0-0 9.h3

Question: What a shy move! Why?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: White obviously wants to avoid a future ...Bg4. Both sides are making useful waiting moves. White cannot play Nc3 yet due to ...Na5 and Black doesn’t want to redeploy his c6-knight until White does something against that threat to be able to develop his b1-knight.

9...h6

Black chooses a typical manoeuvre, first avoiding the Ng5 jump with the idea of continuing with ...Re8 and ...Bf8. The main alternative is 9...Bb7, which Vitiugov had played some months before.

10.Re1 Re8

Exercise: There are several moves available, which do you think Carlsen chose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

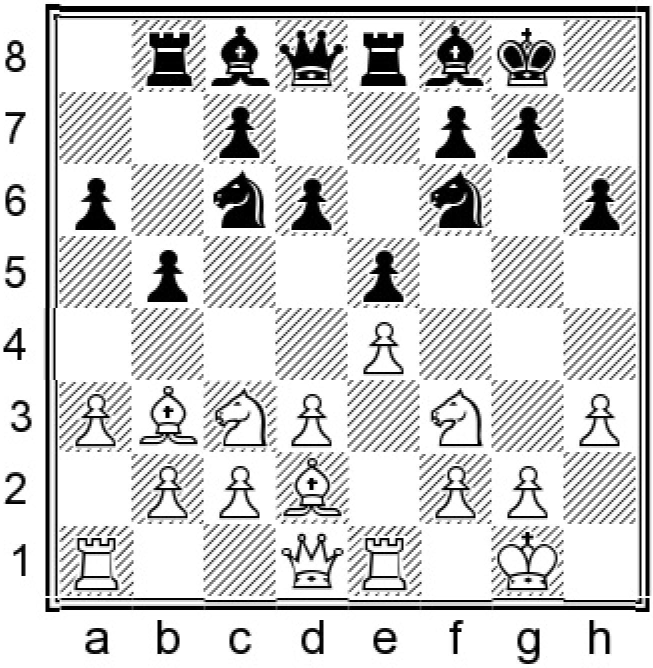
11.a3

He assumed that there are no more undoubtedly useful waiting moves and prepared Nc3. This move creates a safe retreat for his b3-bishop. It is more flexible than the alternative 11.a4.

11...Bf8

Continuing with his idea. This is the most consistent move, although in the absence of concrete threats Black could still play in different ways, with 11...Bb7 followed by e.g. the typical plan ...Qd7 and ...Nd8-e6, among other ideas.

12.Nc3 Rb8



Question: Why did he play this move?

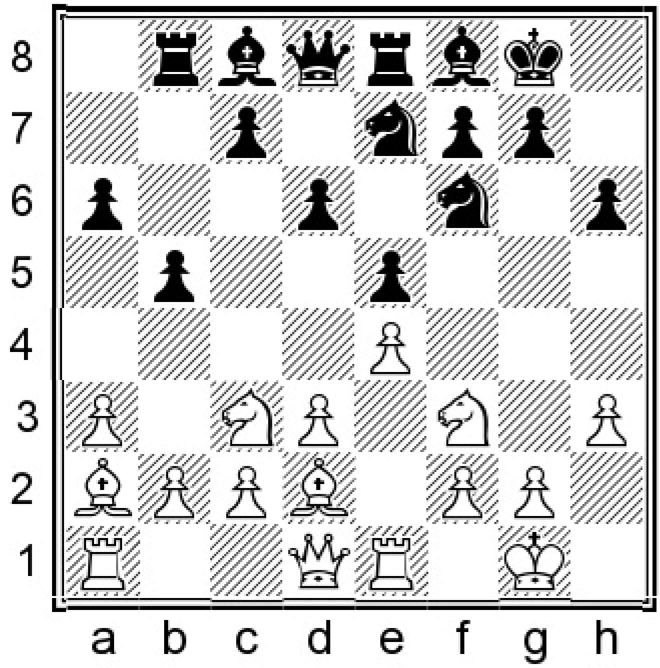
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The rook moves away from the h1-a8 long diagonal, anticipating a possible Nd5. This is one of the more usual ideas from White. If 13.Nd5 then after 13...Nxd5 14.Bxd5 there is no pin and 14...Ne7 15.Ba2 Ng6 is possible, with an acceptable position.

13.Ba2

White didn't see clearly how to continue, so he chose a waiting move again, anticipating a possible ...Na5.

13...Ne7



Exercise: Black is the first to initiate a concrete plan. What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14.Nh4

Carlsen decides to stop Black's idea of playing ...Ng6, and now Black must evaluate if continuing with the idea justifies a weakening move on his kingside.

14...g5!

Black accepts the challenge. It is a good decision, not the only one available, but it is correct and was praised by Carlsen after the game. If Black plays a more hesitant move like 14...c6?!, controlling d5, White would answer 15.Qf3!, planning Qg3.

15.Nf3 Ng6

Question: What did White get for the two tempi wasted by his knight?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: We cannot say that White gained any advantage, but he complicated the position, which is now positionally more complex. Black is fine, but we cannot underestimate his weaknesses on the kingside, especially the hole on f5, though this is not important for now. The position is equal, and the advantage will go to the side that plays better, so any result is possible.

16.Nh2

Carlsen immediately tries to take advantage of the weakness created on f5, with a timely Ng4 joined to the manoeuvre Ne2–g3 and Qf3.

If 16.d4 then 16...c5 is satisfactory, and after 17.dxe5 dxe5 18.Nd5 Black may play 18...Bg7 followed by 19...Nf4, with a good position.

16.Nd5 is not to be feared either, as the simple 16...Bg7 is possible and Black has no problems.

Question: Is the move played by Carlsen better?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Objectively it isn't, but, again, it maintains the tension in the game, and the position is complex. Both sides have to take concrete decisions with several options of similar strength.

16...c6

Black continues to play good moves, not only controlling d5. This move also prepares ...d5.

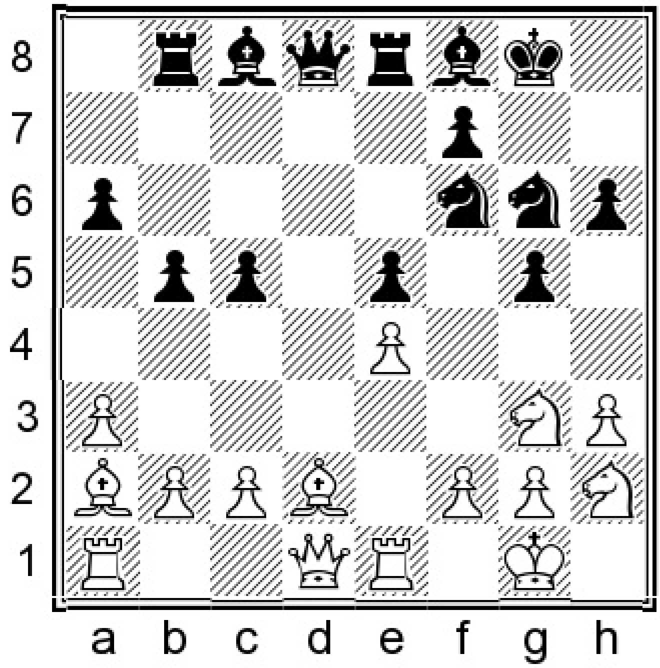
17.Ne2 d5 18.Ng3 dxe4 19.dxe4 Rb7?!

Black commits a slight inaccuracy.

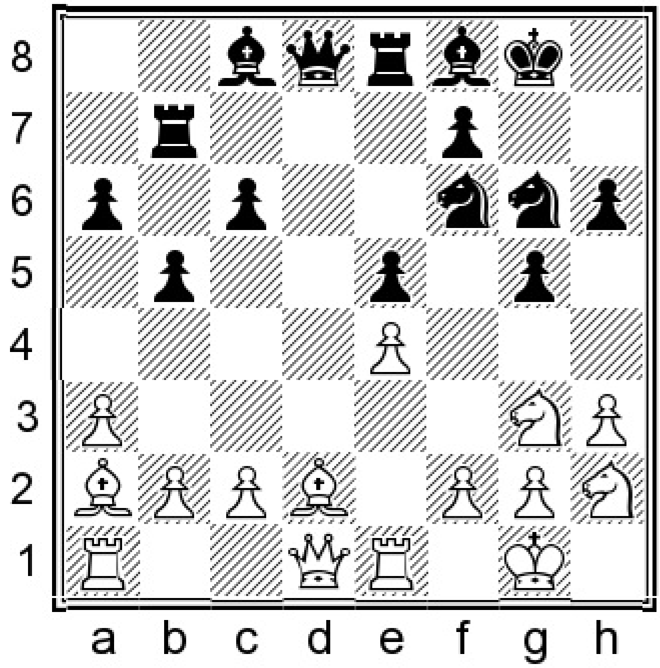
Question: Really? After opening the d-file the rook goes to occupy it, so why is it inaccurate?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The idea is good, but it was even better to play 19...c5!, trying to neutralize the bishop with 20...c4.



If here 20.Ng4 Black cannot play 20...c4? yet due to 21.Bxg5! hxg5 22.Qxd8 and Nxf6+, but Black gets a good position playing 20...Bxg4! first, and after 21.hxg4 c4! White cannot advantageously get rid of the c4-pawn with 22.b3 due to 22...c3! 23.Bxc3 Rc8 24.Qxd8 Rexd8 25.Ba5 Rd7, or even 23...Qxd1 followed by ...Rbc8, and Black is fine.



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20.Qf3!

Tactics appear even in apparently quiet positions. In this case they allow White to slightly improve his chances: Black cannot play 20...Qxd2 because 21.Qxf6 attacks both g6 and c6, so the queen gains control of f5. In case of a future Nf5 Bxf5 he can retake with the queen. Meanwhile, this move also prepares Rad1.

20...Nf4

Black chose to defend by preparing a counterattack, leaving control of f5 to the white queen, with a future ...h5 and ...g4 in mind. 20...c5 intending ...c4 was also acceptable.

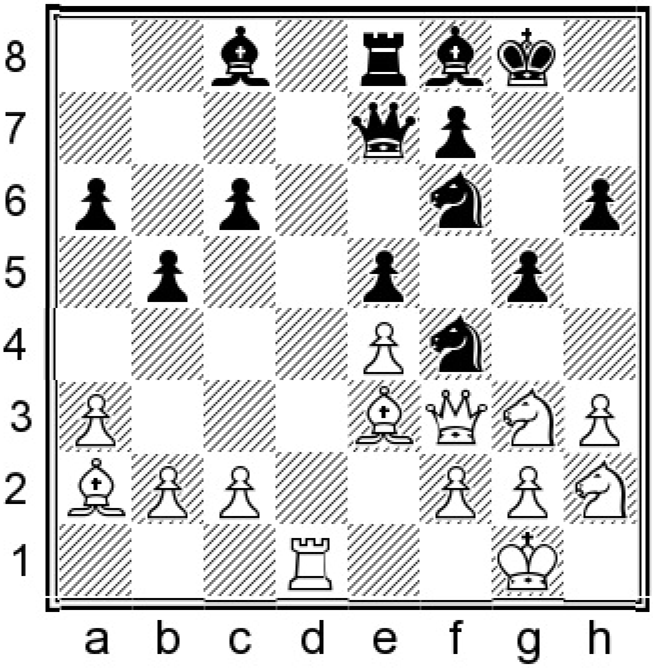
21.Rad1 Rd7 22.Be3

Now that the bishop is on e3, the advance b4 must be considered.

22...Rxd1

An odd decision. The justification for ceding the d-file isn't clear. Black could have played 22...c5, then after 23.Ng4 Rxd1 24.Rxd1 it is possible to continue with 24...Bxg4! 25.hxg4 Qc8, with a counterattack on the kingside. After 26.Nf5 the knight looks strong on f5, but Black isn't worse after 26...h5!, then 27.gxh5? loses to 27...g4. The engines don't see problems for Black after the "computer line" 27.Rd6 hxg4 28.Qd1 Nxe4 29.Rd7 c4 30.Qxg4 Ne6, followed by 31...Nf6.

23.Rxd1 Qe7



Exercise: What would you play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

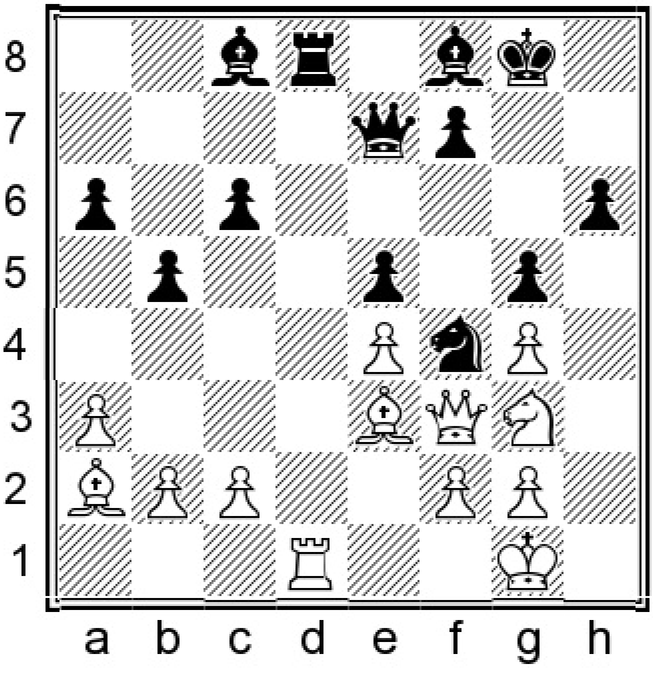
24.Ng4

If your choice was to play 24.b4! first, you found a slight improvement over the move played by Carlsen. Your choice would control c5, planning to follow with Ng4. After Black replies 24...h5, controlling g4, if White immediately answers 25.Bxf4 exf4 26.Nxh5 Nxe4 the engines see no problems for Black after 27.Ng4 Bg7. However, White can do better by first reorganizing his forces playing 25.Rd2, leaving d1 for the queen and maintaining the threat of Bxf4 and then taking the h5-pawn. After 25...Rd8 then 26.Bxf4 exf4 27.Rxd8 Qxd8 28.Nxh5 is possible, taking the pawn in better conditions than before, as the e4 pawn is not lost.

24...Nxg4?!

White's pressure begins to bear fruit, although nothing is irreparable yet. Black still had 24...c5! planning...c4. Of course 25.Bxc5? now is wrong due to the intermediate move 25...Bxg4, but now 25.Rd2 c4 26.Nxf6+ Qxf6 27.Qd1 is not dangerous for Black: with his bishop locked on a2 White has only the d-file, and that is not enough. There is no dangerous invasion and there might follow 27...Qc6 and then 28...Be6, supporting c4 with a good game.

25.hxg4 Rd8



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26.Re1!

White continues to maintain the tension. The engines like the immediate 26.Nf5, but at the board to continue simplifying is not the best policy, unless a clear advantage is found. After 26...Rxd1+ 27.Qxd1 Qd7 28.Qf3, preparing g3, White is slightly better, but it isn't clear how dangerous it is for Black after e.g. 28...Qd8 29.g3 Ne6, and if 30.b4 then 30...a5.

26...c5?!

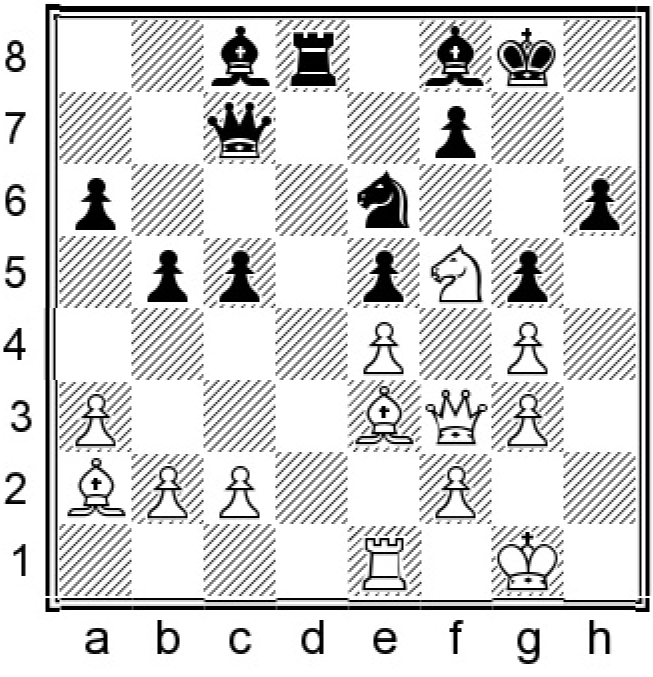
Justifying Carlsen's choice, Black finally plays the correct plan, which was at his disposal several times, but not at the best moment. His position is about to crack.

Black was still fine after withdrawing his queen before Nf5 was played. After for example 26...Qc7 27.Nf5 Be6 28.Bxe6 fxe6 29.Ng3, with the idea of continuing with Nf1 and g3, there could follow 29...Be7, controlling f6 in advance, and White's advantage is minimal.

27.Nf5 Qc7

Of course 27...Bxf5 28.gxf5 is very unpleasant.

28.g3 Ne6



Exercise: White has several ways to counter Black's idea of playing 29...Nd4. What do you think

Carlsen played?

Show/Hide Solution

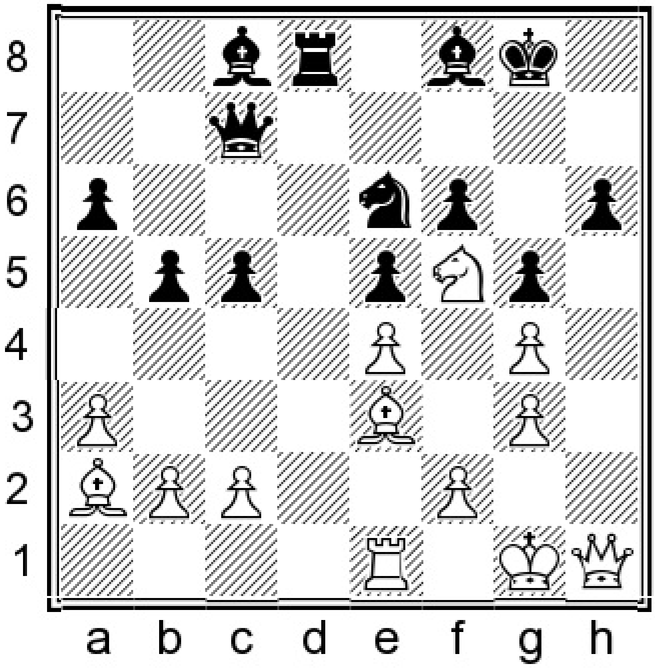
Answer:

29.Qh1

He played in a very original way, with a move both prophylactic and attacking. It is hard to say if this is the strongest move, but it surely forces Black to take crucial decisions. First of all 29...Kh7 is inconvenient due to 30.Bxe6 Bxe6 31.Bxg5.

29...f6?

And Black finally collapses, hopelessly weakening his light squares and his entire position. “After 29...Nd4! he is still worse, but he is sort of fighting at the very least,” said Carlsen after the game. There could follow 30.Bxd4 exd4 31.Nxh6+ Bxh6 32.Qxh6 Qe7 33.f4, and White is better but it is still a fight.



Exercise: Which move induced the early resignation of his opponent?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

30.Bd5!

He gets rid of the threat 30...c4, maintaining the knight pin and the threat to take on h6.

This is better than the hasty 30.Nxh6+. After 30...Bxh6 31.Qxh6 Qg7, followed by ...c4 if the white queen moves away Black can offer resistance.

Black's resignation was no surprise for Carlsen, and the engines are not surprised either. After the sad 30...Qh7 White can play 31.b4, opening the game. After for example 31...cxb4?! 32.Bb6 Re8 33.axb4, creating a weakness on a6 and maintaining the idea of playing Qh5 (the immediate 33.Qh5 Qf7 34.Bc6, winning material, is strong too) 33...Bxb4?! 34.Qh5 Rf8 35.Rb1 a5 36.Kg2 (36.Rxb4 is also interesting) 36...Kh8 37.Rh1 there is no defence.

1–0

Carlsen didn't obtain anything special from the opening, but he maintained tension in the game, with chances to fight. Both sides had several good continuations to choose from.

White was slightly better, but Carlsen said it was more an optical advantage than something more tangible, as he had only the f5 square to be proud of.

Black defended well for several moves, but White continued pressing. Black committed several small inaccuracies, and finally collapsed. The game finished somewhat abruptly.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) "A chess game, after all, is a fight..." (Lasker). The practical factor is very important. Carlsen pressed his opponent's position incessantly, forcing him to choose among several satisfactory choices. (8.Bd2! 14.Nh4! 26.Re1!)

2.) "Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep? When to do it?" Sometimes, it is essential to figure out the right answer to these questions at the board. (22...Rxd1? 24...Nxg4? 26.Re1!)

3.) It is necessary to find the best plan in the position, but no less important is to know when is the proper time to do it. (*22...c5! 24...c5!* 26...c5?)

4.) "Pawns can never move back". It's important to evaluate correctly the pros and cons before advancing a pawn in an unfamiliar situation. (14...g5! 29...f6?)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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